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# MY TRUE KNIGHT.

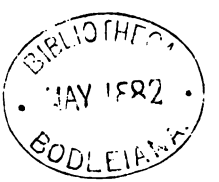
## A Novel.

BY

DORA VERE.

'It occupies me to turn back regards
On what I have seen or pondered sad or cheery,
And what I write, I cast upon the stream
To swim or sink; I have had at least my dream.'
BYRON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

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# MY TRUE KNIGHT.

## CHAPTER I.

'Somewhat back from the village street
Stands the old-fashioned country seat;
Across its antique portico
Tall poplar trees their shadows throw,
And from its station in the hall,
An ancient timepiece says to all,
Forever—never;
Never—forever.'

LONGFELLOW.

A LONG lofty room, whose panelled walls peep out here and there from between the massive gilt frames of portraits purporting



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to represent dead and gone Fanes—a room the carving, furniture, and general air of which speak of a repose long undisturbed.

Powder, paint and patches, rustling silks, and clanking swords, were once not unfamiliar sights at Notley Hall. Fair women and brave men now hushed to rest for ever in the sleep of ages have trod its corridors, and probably whispered sweet vows of love in the oriel window over yonder, through which, in the summer days, the sweet fragrant scent from the rose garden steals lightly, and with dainty tread.

But there is no summer sunlight now.

From the big stone fireplace flashes the ruddy glow of a wood fire ; a china bowl filled with snowdrops (fair maids of February) and violets stands on the carved

oak table, a sort of oasis in the desert. A huge tiger skin, whose claws are still in nature's setting, is thrown carelessly over a high-backed arm-chair, the emptiness of which reminds one instinctively of its owner's absence.

Shrilly, plaintively sobbing, the March wind twines her bony arms around the old Hall, as if in mournful, heart-broken farewell.

In a heavy oak chair, that is much too large for her slight frame, sits a young girl dressed in deep mourning. Her attitude is listless, her eyes fixed absently on the empty rose garden, while the last rays of the setting sun, as he sinks to rest in a bed of crimson light, fall in a reluctant good-bye on her smooth classical head.

At the table, with a bundle of papers

before him, held together with red tape, sits an elderly man: his head is bald, with the exception of a frill above his collar of iron grey hair; his black surtout coat is carefully brushed, as is also the rest of his professional mourning. He has given a short dry preliminary cough, and he now speaks.

'I have again searched through all your grandfather's papers, Miss Fane,' he says, 'and I am afraid we must make the best of the inevitable, and face the fact that the will which my late client burnt just before his death was the last one he executed; in plain English, your uncle in Australia inherits the entire property, and you——'

He hesitates.

'And I have not a penny in the world,' says the girl, dauntlessly raising her head;

'don't try to gloss it over, Mr. Matthews, I am perfectly well aware of the fact.'

'For the last time, Miss Fane,' says the lawyer, 'will you tell me exactly what took place between your grandfather and yourself on the evening he died, the evening on which I arrived at Notley with the new will, made according to the new instructions, all ready for your grandfather to sign.'

The tall lithe figure in the chair sighs wearily.

'Well, about eight o'clock in the evening he told me to go to his safe in the library and get his will. He said he had written for you to come with a fresh one, leaving all, instead of half, of his personal estate to me; the entailed property would, as a matter of course, go to my uncle. Grand-

father wished to make the alteration, I believe, because he was terribly angry with my uncle for refusing to return to England.'

'That is so,' says Mr. Matthews; 'that was the reason he gave me for desiring to make a fresh will.'

'He seemed unusually well that night, she goes on a little unsteadily, and turning away her head; 'if possible, more gentle and loving to me than ever. I begged him not to alter his will, saying that perhaps it was not unwillingness, but inability, which prevented my uncle doing as he wished. He denied that, but said on the following day he would tell me all the family secrets, that I might see the justice of the change.'

The girl's voice ceases, and the lawyer's

voice takes up the thread where hers has dropped it.

'I understand that upon your again pleading your uncle's cause Mr. Fane became angry, and to prove that he intended to keep to his determination, threw the will into the fire, saying, "There's an end of it; Matthews will be here to-night with a fresh one, and when that is signed I shall feel satisfied." Afterwards you left the library, and upon returning, half-an-hour later, found——'

The girl springs up and pushes the brown hair off her broad white temples with slender fingers.

'What's the good of raking the whole thing up again?' she says, desperately; 'you know it, I know it, and Bagley the butler knows it—he was dead.'

'Yes, he was dead,' says Mr. Matthews, gravely, 'with the new will unsigned, and the old will a heap of ashes in the fire-place.'

There is silence in the room. The big clock on the chimney-piece strikes four; the regular breathing of the lawyer, and the irregular breathing of the girl, alone break the stillness. Then slowly, and with lagging steps, she goes to the window, and rests her head wearily against the frame.

The lawyer coughs and continues:

'In consequence of the sudden and lamented death of my client, the painful duty devolves upon me of acquainting you with what I understand you are at present unaware, namely the cause of the differences which existed between Mr. Fane's two sons.'

For the first time a look of interest crosses her face.

'You are going to tell me about my mother,' she says, coming to the table. 'I know so little about her, Mr. Matthews,' wistfully.

'It is a long story,' he says; 'will you not hear it better sitting down?'

Without a word she complies.

'I am afraid I must ask you to go back, for a moment, to fifty-five years ago. At that time your grandfather married.

'He had two sons—Herbert, born one year after the marriage; George, born ten years after his brother. As time passed on, a jealousy sprang up between the brothers—a jealousy which grew steadily year by year. When George left school he went into the army, so they met

seldom, and consequently clashed less. Herbert—always morose, quiet, painfully in earnest about everything; George—merry, light-hearted, handsome, a thorough contrast in every particular to his brother. When Herbert was about twenty-five, Mr. Fane received a letter from his old friend Sir William Drayton, who was then serving in India, asking him if he would, in case of his death, be guardian and trustee of his only daughter and heiress, then on her way to England. Mr. Fane declined the trustee proposal utterly, but accepted the guardianship of the little girl. Accordingly she came to Notley, and before she had been there six months she inherited, by the death of her father, a fortune of one hundred thousand pounds.

'Herbert, still so quiet and so terribly

in earnest, fixed his heart on this timid, gentle little girl. As she grew, his love grew, till it became the one absorbing passion of his life. Father, brother, home, the memory of his dead mother, all gave way—were swallowed up in this new, this overmastering love. So at the age of twenty Ruth Drayton became Herbert Fane's promised wife; not that she loved him, but she had seen so few other people, and it had been arranged for her, so she yielded. At that time George obtained some months' leave—you can guess what followed. The young people met; for the first time Miss Drayton found she had a heart, and that heart she unreservedly bestowed upon the handsome George; at the same time Mr. Fane and his eldest son discovered Miss Drayton had also a

temper: she most emphatically declined to marry Herbert. I will not describe to you what followed; words of bitter hatred and heartbroken jealousy are not pleasant words to hear. The young people stood to their determination, and with curses cruel and deep Herbert left England, vowing never to return. From that day to this he never has.

'Mr. Fane saw it was useless to withhold his consent to the marriage, as it would only delay the inevitable for a few months; so, with deep sorrow in his heart for his absent son, he consented. Three days before the wedding, the concern in which all Miss Drayton's money had been invested smashed. This, and her husband's regiment being ordered abroad six months after her marriage, added to all she had

previously suffered, proved the last straw, and when you were born your mother died. Two years after George Fane also died in India of fever.

'So much for the past,' says the lawyer, briskly; 'now for the present.'

The girl raises her head, but does not speak.

'With your permission I propose writing to your uncle, Mr. Herbert Fane, stating the case clearly to him, and informing him of what I more than half suspect he is ignorant, namely, your existence. He will, of course, see in a moment that he must make you a suitable allowance, befitting a lady of your birth and position; and in the meantime Mrs. Matthews will feel honoured if you will take up your residence with us.'

'After having known the Fanes for forty years,' says the girl, rising, and drawing herself up in all her fair young majesty, 'do you dare to propose such a thing to me?—do you for one moment suppose that I could ask alms of a man who cursed my father, embittered my mother's life, and refused to see my grandfather's face again? We have some pride left, Mr. Matthews.'

The lawyer coughs uneasily, and trifles with a bundle of papers before him.

'And do you think,' she continues, vehemently, 'that if I consented to what you propose he would allow me anything? Such a man as that would be pleased to hear I was starving.'

'The family pride you just now spoke of would prevent that,' says Mr. Matthews,

quietly. 'Herbert Fane would do as I suggest.'

'Then once for all,' says the girl, resting her hand on the table, 'understand that I forbid you to write to him on my behalf, and that I decline to touch a farthing of his money if he offers it.'

The lawyer smiles.

'That is a mistake, I think,' he returns; 'when you have lived as long as I have you will think so too; but in the meantime, what, if it is not an impertinent question, do you propose doing?'

'Earning my bread, as many better women have done before me,' she answers bravely; 'I can do that.'

'In what capacity?'

'Oh, I don't know; I should do for a governess, should not I?' with a forlorn little laugh.

'I cannot imagine you in such a position,' he says, turning away his head; 'it is preposterous. Think again over what I propose, and write me your decision.'

'I have decided,' she says, earnestly; then, as he prepares to take his leave: 'I beg your pardon for speaking so abruptly a few minutes ago; I do not think I thanked you for your generous offer of a temporary home—it was very kind of you, and I thank you now.'

The lawyer takes the hand stretched out towards him.

'Don't do that, Miss Fane,' he says, unsteadily; 'I should have been proud to have been of any use to you. I think you know that at any time I am at your service. Are you quite sure I can do nothing for you now?'

She puts her hand to her head.

'I scarcely know. Yes; if you can hear of a situation that I am capable of filling, I should be very thankful;' and, with another forlorn little smile, 'give me a character. I suppose I shall want that. I would rather no one knew who I am. I could not bear,' with a shudder, 'to be questioned about the old life; it would jar so horribly: besides, that would be nothing to my employers, if they receive a character from you.'

'I will do my best,' says Mr. Matthews, turning away, 'since you are so determined to take your own way; but I wish I could persuade you to alter your mind.'

With a shake of her head, and a wintry

little smile, she bids him adieu; and the last thing he sees is the tall graceful figure standing in the firelight, like a fair Greek statue.

## CHAPTER II.

Peace, come away! The song of woe
Is after all an earthly song.
Peace, come away! We do him wrong
To sing so wildly. Let us go.'

*In Memoriam.*

'Miss Ruth, let me help you,' beseeches a voice, the tearful choky utterance of which eloquently testifies to the melancholy feelings of its owner. 'You will never fasten it so, miss, and only tear your hands.'

I am kneeling on the floor of my bedroom, and vainly trying to fasten the strap round a large leather box, that

persistently refuses to submit to my frantic efforts.

My old nurse, in a moist condition, the result of long weeping, is standing mournfully over me. The fastening of my coffin-lid could scarcely have a more doleful effect upon her, I think.

'I cannot do it,' I say, vanquished at last; 'it is beyond me. Oh, nursie! Why are my fingers so useless?' and I look ruefully at the refractory strap.

'You were never meant for such work, my pretty,' she says, with another sob. 'You, who have never had anything hard to do in all your life—a bed of roses, as the saying is. And now, to be going amongst strangers, who may be rough and unkind to you; and having your own pretty hair to do, and no one to wait on

you, it breaks my heart. I know the squire never meant it; it is all a mistake, Miss Ruth.'

'Of course it is, nursie dear,' I say, sighing wearily, and pushing my hair from my aching forehead. 'But, as I have told you a hundred times, there is no help for it; and I dare say the governess's situation I am going to will not be so bad after all.'

I rise from the floor as I speak, and go to the window. My head is burning, and a stifling sensation in my throat oppresses me.

'To think of this time last year,' resumes nursie; 'the house so full of people, all laughing and merry, the old squire the merriest of all! Do you remember the night you acted, Miss Ruth? Ah! that was a happy night to me. The squire

let us servants slip in at the back to see the play; but no one acted like you and Sir Jeffery Walsingham.'

'Stop,' I cry, turning hastily round, aroused at last out of the dull apathy which has taken possession of me since my grandfather's death. 'What is the good of raking it all up again? it is *my life* you are speaking of. I have lived that, and it is over; the past is as much dead to me as if I were sleeping beside *him* in the churchyard yonder. I am going to leave it behind now, and begin a new life, in a new character.'

'You don't think, Miss Ruth,' says nurse, timidly, 'that they would let me go with you, just to do your hair, and attend to your clothes, and look after you a bit?'

I laugh a harsh unmusical laugh.

'A governess with a maid to wait upon her! No, I don't think they would quite like it, nursie; it would seem unusual, you see.'

I wonder at the sound of my own voice, it is so hard and tearless; then throwing myself in her arms, and sobbing passionately, I cry:

'Nursie, forgive me; you are the only friend I have in the world. I feel half mad, and scarcely know what I say; you must not think of it when I am gone. I have often been so wilful and horrid, but you must forget that too.'

'My pretty, my pretty!' says nursie, stroking my tangled brown locks with her gentle loving hands. 'I know nothing but good of you; everyone loves you; they are all crying in the village because you are

going; and the horses and the dogs seem wretched, as if they knew something bad was a-going to happen; as for the peacock——'

I raise my head, and survey my swollen eyes and blistered countenance in the glass. Grief, truly, is not becoming.

'I must say "good-bye" to them all now,' I say, in a choking voice. 'I wonder if my uncle or anyone he puts here in his place will be kind to the peacock. He is getting very shaky, and having only one eye makes him very helpless and stupid, poor old fellow!'

'I will see about him myself,' says nursie, consolingly. 'I feel sure they will be good to him as long as he lives.'

I dry my tears and go into the garden, where I have spent so many happy hours,

and wander along the dear familiar old paths to the rustic arbour, up which the sweet-smelling honeysuckle was wont to climb. Ah! how it is filled with pleasant memories, the ghosts of days now past and gone for ever! Then to the rose garden, but there are no sweet-scented blossoms now,

'They bloomed with the summer prime;'

only little green shoots that, should the frost-fairy's wand pass over them, will wither and die.

With my lap full of snowdrops, I sit down on the trunk of a fallen tree, and twine them into a wreath, and the peacock struts up and stands beside me.

I think there is something mournful about the look of his one eye as he

watches my trembling fingers arranging the flowers; he is certainly not easy in his mind, and, were he able, would express himself more eloquently: but owing to the limits of Nature, coupled with the deprivations of misfortune, his one eye is the only means by which his feelings can find vent.

'I am going to leave you, old man,' I say, with a catch in my voice. 'I hope they will be good to you. I dare say if they feed you, you will not miss me at all!'

He puts his head on one side and struts a step nearer, as if in polite contradiction of my words.

Having finished my wreath, I rise and try to get nearer to him, but he turns, gives a shrill shriek, and flutters away.

'Good-bye!' I call after him. 'Good-bye!'

Then I go through the little wooden gate into the churchyard, and place my white wreath on a newly-made grave; there is not a blade of grass upon it, only the cold brown earth. I shiver as I stoop down to kiss it.

'Good-bye, again!' I say, and come away.

How glad I am that we Fanes have always preferred resting in God's acre to mouldering in a dark, airless mausoleum.

Perhaps it is an odd fancy, this of ours, but it is born with us, and I like the idea of leaving my beloved dead where the sun shines, and the birds sing, and the flowers bloom, for then we seem to have something in common, even through the long vista of space.

All my good-byes are over.

'Well, Jack,' he says, sighing, 'all this is very pleasant, but I suppose I must go.'

'You have not seen my "Noah's Ark" yet!' cries Mabel. 'You must set up all the animals, you know, and you can't think what a heap of them there is.'

'Do you spend all your time up here?' he asks, turning to me, as he endeavours to set a rickety quadruped on his legs. The fourth leg being much shorter than the other three, it is a work of time and difficulty. 'I never see you, except in the evenings, when you come and play to us.'

'I am generally with the children,' I say, smiling.

'Don't you find it very dull?'

'I am getting used to it now.'

'You are trying to make Shem stand on his head!' interrupts Mabel indignantly.

'Oh, am I? I am sure I beg his pardon. There, now he is all right.'

'You know Miss Allington, don't you?' he asks, turning to me again, having restored Shem to his proper position.

'Yes, a little,' I answer; for there comes into my mind a tall middle-aged lady, with grey hair and a gentle kindly face. Sometimes I look at her and think she must have had a great deal of trouble in her life, for her eyes have a look in them which tells of past suffering and brave patience, crowned by the peace which passeth understanding.

'I wish you two would make friends,' he says, very earnestly; 'I am sure you would like her—she is the very best woman I know.'

And as he speaks a look of deep tender reverence comes into his eyes.

'You are very good,' I say, echoing his wish in my desolate heart; 'but I do not suppose she would care to make friends with me—you know I am only the governess,' bitterly.

He looks unfeignedly disappointed.

'You said you only knew her a little,' he says; 'if you think that, you cannot know her at all.'

I feel rather ashamed of my bitterness.

'I should like to know her,' I say meekly.

'Should you? I am so glad! May I tell her so?'

'Yes,' I answer gratefully; and then I wonder vaguely why he is so kind. Perhaps he feels sorry for me.

'Where can he be?' cries Miss Trevor, suddenly thrusting her head through

the half-open door. 'Captain Walters, we have been looking for you *everywhere!*'

'Have you really?' he says composedly, raising his head; 'how very good of you!'

'What in the world are you doing here?' she asks, still standing in the doorway.

'I am trying to prop Noah up against an elephant; but he is so very much bigger than the elephant that I am afraid it is a hopeless task.'

'How absurd you are! Those children plague everyone in the house. I am for ever wishing Miss Fane would keep them out of the way.'

'They don't plague me,' he says quickly, 'or I should not have come here to them.'

'We wanted to arrange about the theatricals,' says Miss Trevor, abruptly changing the subject: those grey eyes are

getting a little too much for her, and making her feel rather uncomfortable. Bullies are proverbially cowards. 'I should think we may as well do it here as anywhere else. The vicar and his sister are in the drawing-room' (making a grimace), 'and they are really too exhausting.'

'Oh, by all means!' assents Captain Walters.

Then all the rest of the amateur actors troop in one by one, and Jack comes back to me in my lonely corner.

The 'Noah's Ark' is summarily banished, and they all crowd round the fire, laughing and talking. Then some one suggests chairs, and a further supply having been brought, they sit down and proceed to discuss the all-important subject.

'Have you decided upon the *dramatis*

*personæ?*' asks Captain Walters, dipping his pen in the ink and addressing Miss Trevor. 'That seems to be what we are waiting for.'

'Private theatricals take a terrible time arranging,' observes Miss Featherstone, a languid young damsel who also entertains fond hopes of Lord Selwin becoming a captive of her bow and spear.

Mabel has stolen near to Captain Walters, and is peeping over his shoulder, and Jack's large eyes are fixed upon the ladies and gentlemen before him, so it is no longer necessary for me to amuse either of the children, and I turn away, looking out of the window at the dreary prospect without. It reminds me of the Kelpies' wondrous home beneath the shimmering stream:

'Where the larches weep and the birches steep
Their feathery heads in the spray, in the spray;
Where the foam flakes are falling, falling, falling, falling,
Falling forever and aye.'

And then I fall to thinking how the dear home garden is looking, with the mighty branches of the old majestic trees weighed down with gleaming white masses of fresh fallen snow. I am wondering how the poor old peacock stands the cold, and if he is lying stark and stiff in his spotless unsullied shroud. I am pulled up quickly from my day-dream.

'You have quite decided upon acting "Our Boys," I suppose?' asks Miss Allington.

The snow, the peacock, the Kelpies' wondrous home, have all vanished from my mind. No fairy's wand could have

brought about a more sudden and complete transformation than those two words 'Our Boys' have done.

Can it be only a year ago that those words were so gaily wafted through the old rooms and corridors of Notley Hall? Ah! what a night that was! People said we acted well, and that the theatricals were a success. Poor, feeble, forgotten little triumphs!—some who made merry with us then would pass me by on the other side now.

How the squire enjoyed it! How nursie in tearful admiration looked and wondered! How Thomas the coachman applauded from the back row! I can see all their dear honest old faces now. God bless them! I think truer hearts beat under that rough exterior and homely garb

than under many a suit of broadcloth or robe of satin.

And there is yet another recollection that stirs my very soul and makes my heart throb almost to suffocation. A face with dark dreamy eyes—eyes so full of expression, so gentle, so stern, so sad, so merry, so cold, so infinitely tender—eyes so full of contradictions—are looking straight at me over the gulf of the past, over the iron barriers of the future, which must divide me from them for ever more, and a voice that 'to me was sweet music' is murmuring, '*Cara mia*, you are acting divinely to-night—perfectly.'

Ah! Jeffery, Jeffery, where are you now, I wonder? Gaily disporting yourself under an Italian sky perhaps. Are you whispering sweet tender little speeches

into other ears, just as you whispered them into mine? Are your eyes, full of passionate love and longing, as they were that night, only one little year ago, fixed on another face that is fairer, may be, than mine? Oh, my beautiful, princely lover! you are very goodly to look upon, a man that many women would die for; if you are true as you are tender, then verily you are true indeed.

Between Miss Allington's question and Captain Walter's answer, that well-remembered evening has passed like a flash before me once again; but I do not go back to the sky, or the snow, or the peacock. I listen with all my might now, interested at last, because, without any help of mine, the leaves have been turned backwards till the book is lying open at a

chapter of my own life, the life that was buried ten long months ago under the snowdrop wreath in the quiet churchyard.

'We decided upon that comedy because, if you recollect, the three scenes take place in three rooms which can be arranged without any difficulty, and the dresses are all of a modern description, which is also an advantage.'

Then Captain Walters once more dips his pen in the ink, and says:

'Sir Geoffery Champneys? Who am I to put down for that character?'

'Colonel Sinclair, of course; there cannot be two questions about that!' answers Miss Trevor, decidedly. 'Talbot, his son? You must take that part, Selwin.'

'I don't positively think I could

manage it,' says his lordship, with genuine humility.

'Oh, but you *must!*' cry Miss Trevor and Miss Featherstone, in a breath.

'I don't see how one fe'la can possibly pretend to be another fe'la, do you?' putting his glass in his eye.

'We shan't let you off, Selwin: you are made for the part,' says Captain Walters, laughing. 'And, that difficulty being settled, who is to be the butterman?'

'My brother Charlie,' replies Miss Trevor; 'he has acted the part before, and can do it very well.'

'Charlie Middlewicks?'

A horrible choking sensation rises in my throat; in my distant corner in the window-seat I can almost hear my heart beating.

*It is Jeffrey's part.*

'You must take it, Captain Walters,' says everyone at once.

Then the other characters are chosen: Miss Allington, for Aunt Clarissa, Florence Trevor for Mary Melrose, the poor cousin, and Miss Featherstone for Violet, the heiress; the others I do not even hear, for I begin to feel wearied. After all, what is it to me who is going to act?

It has never been very satisfactory to a starving man to watch through a window some one eating a good dinner.

I look down at Jack.

The caressing little fingers have left off stroking my hair long since; his head has fallen on my shoulder, and the tired little face is at rest.

I lift him gently in my arms, and, without waking him, leave the room. As I go, I hear Captain Walters say softly :

'What would not Raphael have given for a vision like that ?'

## CHAPTER IV.

'Weary of living, so weary,
Longing to lie down and die;
To find for the sad heart and dreary
The end of the pilgrimage nigh.
Weary, so weary of wishing
For a form that has gone from my sight,
For a voice that is hushed to me ever,
And eyes that to me were so bright!'

'Miss Fane, you are looking tired, and a little sad,' says a kind voice at my elbow.

The children have gone out with the nurse, and I am sitting alone in the deserted schoolroom. I look up and see Miss Allington beside me.

'May I come and talk to you for a little time?'

I bring myself back with a shake from the past to the present.

'You are very good,' I say, with a wintry little smile; 'I feel rather stupid company for anyone now.'

'I am afraid these are dreary holidays for you.'

'It is my life,' I respond musingly, looking at the fire. 'Life is generally dreary work, is not it?'

She sighs.

'It should not be to you, who are so young—your life has not always been like this.'

'Oh no, no!' I cry quickly. 'It was all so different, so—so——' Then I check myself. 'I was never in a situation till I

came here,' relapsing into the reserved manner that has grown upon me of late.

Miss Allington does not question me about my old life—she does not question me about anything; but she takes my hand in hers and says softly:

'I, too, have had trouble; will you let me be your friend—will you let me try to make your life a little happier?'

I look at her, and a great wonder fills my heart. She and Captain Walters are the only two people who have spoken kindly to me since I came—the only two people who by their words and actions have placed me on an equality with themselves. Then the choking sensation comes in my throat, the harsh cords round my heart seem loosed, and the barrier of ice that has divided me from my fellow crea-

tures is melting fast. I give one or two convulsive little gasps, and then I lay my head on her knee and sob out all my life in her patient, willing ears.

'Poor little girl,' she says softly, when I have finished; 'I am so glad you have told me all about it; we shall be great friends, shall not we? And you will tell me all your troubles?—they lose half their weight when shared by some one else.'

'Yes,' I answer faintly; 'but, Miss Allington, you will not tell them here who I am? I don't want anyone to know; I could not bear to be questioned about it all: it would be torture. I would rather be simply 'the governess;' the old life is done with now, but I have the remembrance to cling to as long as I live.'

'I quite understand, dear,' she answers

softly. 'I will not say a word about it to anyone; it shall be as you wish.'

Then she stoops over me and kisses me, and I feel that her cheeks, too, are wet with tears.

A knock at the door.

'Come in,' I say, in a dismal husky voice.

Lady Trevor's maid opens the door, and announces that Miss Fane is required in the drawing-room to read to Miss Gay, and then shuts it again with a bang.

Miss Gay is a deaf but rich old aunt of Sir John's, who pays periodical visits to the Hall, and is tolerated on account of her money, which there is every reason to expect will help to fill the coffers of the Trevor family. Whether at the age of eighty she has a taste for company it is

impossible to say, but certain it is, whenever Lady Trevor has invited a houseful of guests, Miss Gay invariably bears down upon them with her ear-trumpet and her floral caps, and there is no more to be said about it.

A sudden thought came into Miss Trevor's expansive mind that I might be turned to good account in this direction, and consequently I am generally deputed to read the *Times* to her, pick up the dropped stitches in her knitting, and make myself generally useful.

'I will come,' I say; and then I deluge my swollen and tear-stained countenance in cold water, and go.

The drawing-room, a big double room, is divided down the centre by oriental curtains. Soft draperies, luxurious chairs

and couches, splendidly executed paintings, and old china, adorn the room in rich profusion.

As I pass the mirror, I look involuntarily at my own reflection. What a wan tired face it is that looks out at me from the heavy velvet frame! There is still the old stately movement, that came to me as a legacy—the only one—from the Fanes who lived and died 'in the brave days of old;' but oh! the *life* that was in my face has gone—'gone with the summer prime.' And it is indeed winter now.

I divide the curtains, and discover my fate in the shape of Miss Gay on the other side. What a mumbling mass of humanity she looks, poor old soul! Was she ever young and pretty? I wonder—ever anything but toothless and deaf, and almost

blind? Ah me! how inexpressibly sad it is to think of what *was* and now is not!

I pick up the ear-trumpet lying beside her on the chair, and put it under her nose; then she sees it, transfers it to the place art designed it for, and whispers:

'Go on.'

I take in as large a volume of air as my lungs will admit of, and shout at the top of my voice:

'Did you want me?'

Unlike most deaf people, Miss Gay, instead of shouting, speaks in a whisper, which circumstance has been the cause of devout thankfulness to everyone belonging to her.

'I can't hear a word you say,' she murmurs in reply to my unmusical efforts.

I try again, this time with more success.

'Yes. I wanted you to help me to wind this wool.'

I restore the trumpet to the chair again, and take up one of the skeins of wool lying at her feet. I know this occupation will probably continue till the dressing gong sounds, and resign myself to circumstances, very thankful that reading aloud is not this time required of me. Suddenly the voice of Miss Trevor comes from the other side of the curtains.

'If you are very good, Lord Selwin, I will give you a cup of tea.'

'Thanks, awfully.'

'Where is Lady Trevor?' asks the languid voice of Miss Featherstone.

'In her boudoir—a little attack of nerves, I think,' replies Florence.

'And all the rest of the people, where are they? Mrs. Sinclair and Mrs. Elliston, and——'

'Gone out driving,' interrupts Florence. 'I expect them home very soon now.'

'Captain Walters, you are very quiet this afternoon,' says Lady Mabel Causton (a fresh arrival yesterday). 'What is the matter? I remember when we met you at Scarborough last summer you were the soul of merriment.'

'He is in love,' says Lord Selwin; 'a very bad case, Lady Mabel—it is beginning to affect his appetite.'

'Indeed! may I ask who the fortunate lady is?'

'She is like a Greek statue,' says Lord Selwin; 'has eyes like a Madonna, hair like a golden glory, and——'

'Spare us a list of her charms, please, Lord Selwin,' exclaims Miss Featherstone, with asperity. 'You will make Captain Walters quite jealous.'

'Don't you think it is rather bad taste to discuss a lady in this way?' says Captain Walters savagely; 'and considering I have only had the honour of speaking to her twice, it seems rather absurd altogether.'

'There, there, my good fe'la, don't excite yourself, pray!' lisps Lord Selwin. 'It's only a joke, you know.'

'You have not yet told me who the lady is,' again demands Lady Mabel.

Florence Trevor laughs.

'Why, as Lord Selwin says, it's only fun, of course. We were chaffing Captain Walters about our governess, Miss Fane.'

'Oh, that's all!' and Lady Mabel joins

in the laugh. 'I thought you were really in earnest. Fane is rather a good name. Where does she come from?'

'London, I believe. We heard of her through papa's solicitor, Mr. Matthews, who assured us she was quite perfect. He has known her all her life, and her family for some years. So we felt it would be quite safe to engage her.'

I look at Miss Gay in despair. If I could only make my escape! But, alas! her fingers are old and feeble, and she winds slowly; half the skein still remains on my aching arms. I feel my face is burning, and two scalding tears trickling down my cheeks; but her eyes are too dim in the fading light to see them. Involuntarily I make a slight movement towards the trumpet. I will—I *must*—escape.

The next moment I repent having attracted her attention. They must not know I heard it all. I could never look Captain Walters in the face again.

Miss Gay has unfortunately seen the movement, and presents me with the trumpet.

I shake my head vigorously.

'I thought you wanted it?' she says.

I shake my head again; this time she is satisfied, and winds the wool as before.

'Don't you think it is rather a mistake to have a good-looking governess, Flo darling?' remarks Miss Featherstone. 'People of that sort are always more or less objectionable, and never do their work as well as ugly ones. I dismissed my last maid because she was too good-looking, principally.'

'Oh, but that is not the case with Miss Fane,' says Florence. 'She is the most useful and amiable person possible, and really a perfect comfort. We make her do anything we want. It is holiday time now. Mamma keeps her partly out of charity (she seems to have no friends), and partly to attend to the children's clothes. She even alters mine occasionally; and, in fact, does everything Parker objects to. And then she attends to aunty, and the poor people in the village as well, and always keeps the children out of the way.'

'Then, under those circumstances, I think you are wise to look over the crime of her being pretty,' says Captain Walters.

Only two more rounds and the skein will be finished!

'Thank you, that will do,' whispers Miss Gay.

I drop the end of the wool as if it burned me, and run noiselessly out of the room to the boy with the big eyes and loving little heart, who I know is waiting and watching for me.

## CHAPTER V.

'E'en to the death, as tho' ye were my blood,
In all your quarrels will I be your knight.'
*Lancelot and Elaine.*

It is the morning of the day on which the theatricals are to take place. The stage management, under the directions of Captain Walters and Lord Selwin, is progressing most satisfactorily; the long ball-room has been converted into a theatre for the time being; the hothouses have been rifled, and the evergreens half stripped for decorating the room, and for the last two days I have been engaged in stitching

holly-leaves on brown paper, leaving very little flesh on my bones in the process; and now it is finished, and looks extremely pretty and bright.

It is a magnificent day, with a keen frosty air. All the guests are skating on the lake, and I can see them from the schoolroom window: they appear to be thoroughly enjoying themselves.

There are times when my present life seems harder to me than at others. I think this is one of them. I am passionately fond of skating, and the young, healthy blood is coursing through my veins. How I long to make one of that happy party!

What years it seems since last winter! Alas! I never thought enough of it while I had it, and now it is gone. Sitting

there, I seem to live it all over again. And then the shrill laugh of Florence Trevor falls on my ear and recalls me with a start.

'Miss Fane, you have nothing to do,' she cries; 'just go into the garden—will you?—and get some holly and make two more devices. We have been looking at the room, and have come to the conclusion they would be a great improvement.'

'Yes, I will do them,' I say, with a ghastly little attempt at a smile.

'I am off to the skating now,' remarks Florence; 'get the devices done by luncheon time if you can,' and she is gone.

I get some scissors and a basket and go into the garden. The frosty air seems to put new life into me, and sets my blood tingling through my veins. I know that

my eyes are bright and my step elastic, and altogether existence does not seem so monotonous as it did half an hour ago.

I go from tree to tree snipping off the branches, and shaking the glistening frost diamonds from them. I even find myself indulging in two or three notes of an old song, when a step behind me makes me turn round.

'Good-morning, Miss Fane!' says Captain Walters, taking off his hat and offering me his hand.

'Good-morning!' I return in my iciest tone; and then I remember he is my friend, and give him my hand with a smile.

With the wind playing in his 'bonny brown hair,' I cannot help thinking my new champion is indeed goodly to look upon.

'Won't you let me help you?' he asks, taking possession of the basket.

'No, thank you; you will only tear your hands. I cannot do mine much more harm now—look at the scratches!' and I hold up my hands as I speak.

'Ah, horrible!' he says, with a shudder. 'You must not do any more, indeed, poor little hands!' very pityingly.

I laugh.

'The scratches were not all done to-day; some of them are two days old. A few more or less make no difference. I did all the wreathing, you know.'

'What a horrid shame!' he says savagely. 'I believe if they had a mangle they would make you turn it.'

I laugh again, quite heartily this time.

'I am afraid I should not be strong

enough,' I say, shaking my head. 'Mangles are rather heavy things, are not they?'

'Rather, I believe. Miss Fane, what do you do with yourself all day?'

'Oh, I don't know! a variety of things. As I told you before, I am generally with the children.'

'Why don't you come and skate?—it is splendid exercise.'

'Yes; but supposing I can't skate?'

'Then perhaps you will allow me to have the pleasure of teaching you?' he says eagerly.

'Imagine Miss Featherstone's face if she beheld me careering round and round the pond,' I say amusedly. 'We might have a collision, you know, and only think how wounded her aristocratic sensibilities would be if she came in contact with the

governess! No, no, Captain Walters; you are very kind, but it is impossible.'

'Don't say that; Miss Featherstone cannot skate a bit, I assure you,' he says eagerly. 'My arms are so horribly stiff with dragging her round yesterday, I can scarcely use them at all: the fatigues of a field-day are trifling by comparison.'

'I am afraid you don't admire Miss Featherstone.'

'*I hate her!*' he says, with extreme relish; then, stopping suddenly: 'I beg your pardon; don't think me a bear, indulging in such sentiments towards a lady.'

'I don't think you a bear at all,' I return, smiling.

'That is all right; but'—returning to the charge—'won't you really learn to skate?'

*Learn!* I recall once again the sweet old life, the dancing on the ice by torchlight; I think of the firm warm clasp of fingers that may perchance never touch mine again. I remember wishing that dance could go on for ever, and then I become suddenly aware that Captain Walters' eyes are fixed inquiringly on my face.

'How far your thoughts had flown just now!' he says, as our eyes meet. 'I have often watched you, Miss Fane, when you have been playing to us in the evening, and seen that far-off expression come over your face, as if you were recalling some sweet memory. Sometimes your eyes flash, and the colour comes into your face, and you dash off a soul-stirring march that makes my soldier's heart thrill, and then you glide into soft, sweet, dreamy music,

and I know you are far away. I presume sometimes to wonder what your eyes can see, and where your soul has flown to.'

'Back to Paradise perhaps,' I answer recklessly; 'but the flaming sword generally reminds me that the gates are closed before I get very far.'

He looks at me wonderingly.

'Then I was right?—you had a paradise once?'

'Who has not something pleasant to look back upon?' I answer evasively.

'Will you give me something pleasant to look forward to by promising to dance with me this evening?' he asks eagerly.

'I shall not be in the room even,' I say, smiling; 'but I thank you very much for asking me, all the same.'

A look of genuine disappointment crosses his face.

'You do not mean that while we—I mean all the rest of the people' (correcting himself), 'are capering about and enjoying themselves, you will be in that dismal schoolroom alone?'

'Yes, I do. Why not?'

'Because it is infamous that you who are young and——' he stops himself suddenly. 'You are fond of dancing, Miss Fane?'

'Passionately,' I answer, drawing a long breath and looking towards the distant hills. I am busy with my old memories once again. 'I must go now,' I say, stretching out my hand for the basket, 'or I shall not get the devices finished before luncheon.'

Still he keeps the basket in his hand.

'When shall I see you again?'

'Who knows?' I answer carelessly. Then I repent, and add, 'Perhaps to-day.'

His face brightens.

'You will not snub me so dreadfully any more, will you?' he asks. 'I have often wanted to talk to you, but literally dare not, you look so unapproachable. I can't imagine how I ever found courage to venture into the schoolroom the other day. May I come again some day?'

'I think you had better not,' I say, smiling.

'Why?'

'Lady Trevor might not approve. You must remember I am only the governess.'

'Remember!' he breaks out petulantly; 'as you remind me of the fact about every

five minutes I am in no danger of forgetting it. You even try to look the part, but you cannot,' triumphantly. 'You will never accomplish that downtrodden look most governesses get, if you live this life for fifty years (which God forbid!). Beside those people you look much more like a queen or an empress.' Then, 'I beg your pardon. I have a terrible habit of saying just what I think. Will you forgive me?'

I hold out my hand.

'Yes, I think so,' I say, smiling, 'if you will give me the basket and promise not to pay me any more compliments.'

He takes my hand in his.

'Good-bye,' I say. 'You ought to have lived in the days of King Arthur, Captain Walters; you would have been a very

chivalrous knight;' and then I run lightly away, and leave him standing against the holly-bush, gazing after me.

The last leaf of holly is stitched on as the gong sounds for luncheon. The sound of wheels on the gravel below attracts my attention, and curiosity makes me crane my neck to see who has arrived. A tall fair young man enveloped in an ulster, the cuffs and collar of which are trimmed heavily with fur, is getting out of the dog-cart. The strong likeness to Florence Trevor in the new-comer tells me at once that Sir John's son and heir has arrived. Then the door opens, and a maid comes in to lay the cloth for the schoolroom dinner.

## CHAPTER VI.

'Is this a dream? Then waking would be pain.
Oh, do not wake me! Let me dream again!'

'IT is the most disappointing, provoking thing I ever heard of!' cries Florence Trevor, bursting into the schoolroom, where Miss Allington and I are enjoying blind-man's holiday to our heart's content.

'The dull grey haze of daylight' is fast merging 'far into the starless night,' but a faint glimmer of the dying day is still peeping at us as we sit before the glowing fire and talk of many things.

"What has happened?' asks Miss Allington.

'Julia Featherstone has fallen down upon the ice and sprained her ankle so badly that she cannot stand; of course, now the theatricals must be given up. We cannot do without her. And it is far too late for anyone else to learn the part. It is altogether too disappointing for anything.'

And a tear rolls down the bridge of her nose, and another follows.

'It is most unfortunate,' says Miss Allington, sympathetically. 'I am afraid there is no help for it now.'

'And to think,' resumes the tearful Florence, 'of the hours I spent decorating the room' (this was a happy delusion). 'And of those dresses Madame Frederica

sent me on purpose for the theatricals (of course, I never looked quite so nice in anything before—it always is the way!)—it makes me wretched to think I cannot wear them.'

While Miss Trevor has been talking I have been looking into the fire. A thought has come into my mind, but I hesitate to give it utterance. A wild overpowering desire fills me to raise the cup my lips have not touched for so long, and take one more draught of the intoxicating beverage it contains.

Then I speak.

'Miss Trevor, if you like *I* can take Miss Featherstone's part.'

'You!' exclaims Florence; 'how can you possibly learn it in the time?'

'I know every word of it,' I answer,

in a quiet voice, though my heart is beating strangely. 'I acted it last winter.'

Florence springs up and claps her hands.

'I always said you were a treasure, Miss Fane!' she cries. 'Who would have dreamed of your helping us out of this difficulty? How glad I am, for I can wear the dress after all; but,' her face clouding, 'what are we to do with you? You cannot act in your black dress, and,' surveying her by no means slender figure in the glass, 'you are so abominably thin, none of my clothes would fit you.'

'I kept the dresses I acted in last winter,' I say, with a lump in my throat at the recollection of that evening. 'They are the only coloured things I have, but I am sure they will do.'

'How remarkably fortunate!' says Miss Trevor; 'but are they good enough?'

I smile.

'Do you care to see them and judge for yourself?'

'Yes, by all means,' she returns; 'come at once, perhaps we can do something to them and make them presentable.'

I lead the way to my somewhat sparingly furnished bedroom, wondering if I am wise to let this girl take so large a peep at my old life; but I have taken the plunge, and I must go through with it now.

I kneel down and unlock the box. Then I take out the dresses and lay them on the bed.

Miss Trevor opens her mouth and literally gasps.

'Where did you get them?' she cries.

'They are magnificent! This one' (touching a white brocade) 'must have cost thirty pounds at least.'

'Rather more,' I say, laughing aloud. I feel reckless to-night. My brain is on fire, for the very sight of those dresses makes my heart throb wildly.

Florence regards me with wonder and amazement.

'Where did you get them?' she repeats.

Then, as I show no inclination to enlighten her, she goes on:

'Well, I was never more relieved about anything in my life. It would have been horribly disappointing if we could not have acted. I am sure, when I explain it to the others, they will not mind acting with you a bit, and if you cannot do it very well, we will forgive you.'

After this magnanimous speech she leaves the room.

'Ruth,' says Miss Allington anxiously (we have become great friends now), 'will it be too much for you?'

'Not in the least,' I answer; 'don't you see I long, I pant for a glimpse into the old life once more, and to-night it is coming, coming, coming!'

* * * * *

It is a quarter to eight, and I am standing before my looking-glass, taking a final survey of my general appearance before descending to the green-room. The excitement has made my eyes unusually bright, but I am quite calm now, with a fixed determination that, whatever the new life shall bring me, the old life, that was mine

so long, shall not be ashamed of me to-night.

My dress, of pale blue satin and cashmere, falls in soft folds around me. I can almost fancy I am the Ruth Fane of old, and that the past ten months have all been a hideous dream.

Then I turn from the mirror and go downstairs. Most, if not all, of the other actors are assembled; as I draw near I can hear their voices talking within.

'I am really quite curious to see her,' says a voice that closely resembles Sir John's. 'Florence says she is positively good-looking. Now, I never saw a governess blessed with a single attraction in my life.'

I push open the door and enter. Charlie Trevor ceases speaking; there is a little

awkward pause, and then Captain Walters comes forward.

'I am *so* glad you are going to act,' he says.

And when I raise my eyes to his I know by the great glad light in them he is speaking the truth.

Then Miss Allington comes to me, and the interrupted conversation in the other part of the room is resumed.

'Almost all the people are here,' says Lord Selwin, returning from a tour of inspection, 'and it is five minutes past eight; had we not better tell the band to begin?'

'By all means,' returns Charlie Trevor.

Two minutes more, and the hum of voices is drowned in the strains of the music.

They are all on the stage now—all but Florence Trevor and me.

'You really look very well,' she says encouragingly. 'I think you will do; I rather wish now that I had taken the part myself—it admits of much handsomer dresses than mine does. Now, you must remember to hold up your head and speak distinctly, you know; and don't look awkward with your hands—not that you do,' she adds generously, 'but I thought I would give you a hint.'

I am spared a reply by our being called for, and then I throw myself heart and soul into my part. Miss Trevor's part is soon over, and I am alone on the stage. A faint, dizzy feeling comes over me; I almost expect the door to open and *someone else,* that is not Captain Walters, to enter.

I rouse myself with a shake, and am Violet Melrose again, with Charlie Middlewick's arm round my waist, and his eyes looking into mine. I can feel his arm trembling, though it scarcely touches me, and there is an eager, inquiring light in his eyes.

Surely Captain Walters is an extremely good actor!

The first act is over now, and the curtain has fallen. We are once more assembled in the green-room, in readiness for the second.

I am dressed in the white brocaded silk that so astonished Florence; dressed, in fact, exactly as I was on that night a year ago, except that I have only one glove.

'Where is your other glove?' asks Miss Trevor, coming up to me.

Poor Florence, she feels it is her duty to look after me, and that she is half responsible for my manners and behaviour generally.

The hot blood mounts to my cheeks; I feel I am blushing frightfully.

'I have not got it,' I stammer.

'Don't you know where it is?'

I feel I am getting hotter (the last time I saw it, it was being tucked into the breast-pocket of Sir Jeffery's dress-coat).

'I did not bring it with me,' I say, turning away.

'Have you not got another pair?'

'No,' I answer.

'Then go upstairs and get a pair of mine; there is plenty of time,' says Florence.

Thankfully I escape from the room, and

run along the corridor with my hands pressed against my burning cheeks; suddenly I am brought to a standstill, having precipitated myself violently into the arms of somebody.

I tear my hands from my face.

'I beg your pardon,' I say; and then I find both my hands are imprisoned in a firm, strong clasp, and a voice that I know so well, a voice that makes every nerve in my body quiver, says:

'*Cara mia*, I have found you at last!'

'Sir Jeffery, where did you come from?' I falter, in a little weak voice that sounds a long way off. 'I thought you were in Italy.'

'I only returned last week; do you know, I live only two miles from here?'

He is still holding my hands in his, as if he had forgotten to return them.

'Won't you look at me, and tell me you are glad to see me back?'

I raise my eyes to his. He is not in the least altered with his year of foreign travel. Perhaps a little browner and handsomer, but that is all.

'I am very glad to see you back,' I say faintly.

'Where were you running to when I caught you, *cara mia?*' he says, bending down till his moustache almost touches my face.

'To get a pair of Miss Trevor's gloves.'

'Can't Miss Trevor wait upon herself?'

'They were for me.'

He laughs, an amused, musical laugh.

'Why,' still clasping my hands caress-

ingly in his, 'both your little hands would go into one of her gloves. You can't be in earnest?'

'I am,' I say, desperately, dragging away my hands.

'You lost one of your gloves when you acted last Christmas-time, did not you?' he says, still stooping down and trying to see my face. 'I think you are a very careless young lady to lose another to-night. I wonder where that little glove is now?' teasingly.

'I must go,' I say. 'I shall keep them waiting.'

'I shall see you after the theatricals?' he asks.

'No,' I say, shaking my head. 'Cinderella's pleasure ended when the clock struck twelve—mine ends when the curtain falls.'

'I don't understand,' looking mystified. 'Are you not staying here?'

'Yes; I am making a long stay,' I answer, with a wretched unmusical laugh.

'Then I shall see you if I call to-morrow?'

'You must not ask for me!' I cry in alarm. 'Promise that you will not tell anyone you know me! You must not, indeed—*indeed* you must not!'

'Why?'

'I cannot tell you now,' I say desperately.

'Why not?' he asks again.

'There is not time. It is a long story.'

'Well, I must see you to-morrow. You will tell me it then?'

'Yes, to-morrow.'

'Can't you meet me somewhere?' he asks. 'I want a long quiet talk with you, away from all these people.'

I put my hand to my head.

'Be at the old ruin at three o'clock to-morrow,' I say. 'And in the meantime you do not know me.'

And I rush past him upstairs, get the gloves, and am only back in the green-room as the bell tinkles for the curtain to rise on the second act.

I feel as if I am treading on air, as I throw myself into my part as if it were my life. Whenever I raise my eyes they meet Jeffery's. He is sitting in the middle of the second row of spectators, his arms folded, his head well thrown back, and the old sweet smile playing round his mouth.

We are in the middle of the act; the retired butterman and I alone on the stage. He is trying to persuade himself that I am not so disagreeable as I appear, and that, after a time, he may bring himself to consent to my marriage with his son. I look at Sir Jeffery: he is leaning eagerly forward, his eyes still fixed upon me; but there is a great surprise in them now. And then I know that during the last few months my face has learned to wear a look that knew it not the last time we met: the merriment has gone out of it, and something very like bitterness and contempt taken its place.

And now Sir Talbot and Mr. Middlewick have quarrelled with their sons past forgiveness, and Florence and I are standing with our lovers' arms round us, while

they are being denounced by their fathers and sentenced to banishment. Florence Trevor is certainly clinging to her swain with rather more devotion than the occasion demands or he appreciates. My head is resting lightly on Captain Walters' shoulder; I can feel his breath coming in short, quick gasps as he vows that no earthly consideration shall separate us. And when he looks at me, I see he is no longer acting—he is terribly in earnest; his arm tightens round me, and his eyes are fixed on mine eagerly, pleadingly.

The curtain is falling. Once more I look across at Jeffery. He is still leaning forward, but on his face there is a scowl black as night. I disengage myself hastily and with a slight shudder from my lover's embrace.

Captain Walters observes both the haste and the shudder, and, biting his lip, turns away without a word.

It is all over. The curtain has fallen upon the last act, and I slip out of the room and run quickly upstairs. I wonder vaguely if the evening has been a success, and if everyone has enjoyed it. And then I fall asleep, and dream that I am dancing once again with Sir Jeffery Walsingham, and that he is whispering in my ear:

'*Cara mia,* I have found you at last!'

## CHAPTER VII.

'Away! away! my early dream
Remembrance never must awake:
Oh! where is Lethe's fabled stream?
My foolish heart, be still, or break.'

BYRON.

ALL the morning I am tortured by nervous fears when I think of the old ruin and my appointment there at three o'clock with Sir Jeffery.

I fall to wondering what would be my fate if Miss Trevor, or any other member of the Trevor family, were to see me engaged in a *tête-à-tête* with the lion of

the neighbourhood. Probably instant dismissal. I start nervously when anyone comes quickly into the room, and my fingers tremble so much that I spill the water on its way to my feverish lips.

I look at the clock every five minutes, and am surprised to find so little time has elapsed since last I did so. It is just two o'clock. I wonder if Sir Jeffery will be there, or if he will have forgotten all about it.

Five minutes past. I have decided by this time that he will certainly keep the appointment.

Ten minutes past. I take a book down from the shelf and try to read, but find I have got to the bottom of the page without knowing a word I have read. Again I look at the clock: a quarter

past. I throw the book on the table. I wonder what he will say when he finds out I am only a governess, instead of the petted, indulged grandchild of the owner of Notley Hall. Probably he will take off his hat very politely, remember he has an appointment somewhere, and regret that, under the circumstances, we shall be able to meet so seldom. And then he will stride away, and—— The clock rouses me, striking half-past.

I go to my room with feverish haste, and put on my hat. Then I go downstairs, through the conservatory, and into the garden. The frost has broken up, and there is therefore no one on the lake. Then I turn down the long avenue and into the road beyond.

After struggling over a stile, and sustain-

ing an uncomfortable bruise in the process, I find myself in a field, surrounded by unamiable-looking cows. With hasty steps I make for the nearest gate; it is locked. Well, there is no help for it: I must climb over and risk a second bruise. When I succeed in getting on the top, I look before me.

There is the ruin, looking like a crumbling old skeleton, surrounded by leafless trees that stretch their gnarled old branches upwards towards God's sky. I fancy I can see the outline of a man's figure there—perhaps it is only fancy after all. I descend, and resume my walk. As I get nearer, I take a rapid survey of the country around. There is no one in sight, except that one listening figure. I look at my watch. Ten minutes

to three. I am horribly early, but he is earlier, and seeing me, he advances quickly to meet me.

'*Cara mia*,' he says, taking both my hands in his, 'do you know I have been waiting and watching for you for half an hour?'

'Have you!' I say faintly; 'I am not late.'

'No, I suppose you are not; but I was impatient.'

I take my hands out of his with a shudder; he does not know anything yet.

'Do you know,' he resumes, smiling, 'when I was waiting for you, I was living over again the day we parted at Notley Hall. Do you remember going into the conservatory with me to gather a

flower? It was a lily. I pinned it between the leaves of my Prayer-book, and I am afraid, often since then, during the service, preached my own sermon, making it the text.'

He is not looking at me now; he is walking along slowly by my side, smiling to himself over the memories of the past.

'If you only knew how I have thought of you, and dreamed of you, all this long year, *cara mia*,' he is saying. 'I felt half mad last night when that fellow Walters put his arm round you, and I saw your head resting on his shoulder. I felt as if he had supplanted me. I wonder if I looked very savage! I *felt* simply murderous.'

I try once, twice to speak. I try to

tell him my wretched news, but my mouth feels like a board, and my tongue refuses to give it utterance. He goes on:

'When I saw you come on the stage last night, dressed exactly as you were on that evening a year ago, I could scarcely believe my eyes. Though why I should have been astonished at your staying here, I can't imagine; except that I did not think the Trevors quite the sort of people you would care about. And then I saw in your face something that was not there when I saw it last. It was such a merry little face in those days; but last night there was a depth in your eyes that only suffering can bring. I wished so intensely that I had spoken—that I had asked you to be my wife before I went away. You know why I did not, Ruth; you know it

was because I did not think it right to fetter your sweet young life with a long engagement, and bind you to me when I was going away for so long. Then'—with a low happy laugh—'when you ran into my arms last night, and I felt your hands trembling in mine, I dared to think you had not quite forgotten me.'

We have reached the ruin now.

'Sit down,' he says, pointing to a heap of fallen stones.

Mechanically I obey. Then he sits down beside me.

'How is Mr. Fane?' he says; 'how terribly remiss of me not to ask after my old friend before! It is your fault, *cara mia;* you put all else out of my head, even this mysterious secret you are going to impart to me.'

'He is *dead*,' I say in a hollow voice, turning my white face up to his; '*dead*.'

He starts.

'Impossible! When?'

'Ten months ago, on the fifth of March,' I answer, looking straight before me.

'And you?' he cries.

'*I* am Lady Trevor's governess.'

He drops my hand as if he were shot, and looks at me with obvious doubts of my sanity.

'It is quite true,' I say, laughing harshly; 'that is what I came to tell you to-day.'

Then I go on rapidly, as if I were repeating a lesson, and tell him the old sad story that has become, from long thought, so familiar to me.

He listens in silence—almost like a man in a dream. The weight of my revelation has, as I knew it would, completely stunned him. At last he says with an effort:

'And your life since then, what has it been?'

'Oh! it has been bearable,' I return bitterly; 'they might—the Trevors, I mean—have been worse.'

'I can't quite realise it yet,' he says unsteadily; 'I cannot fancy you a *governess*.'

Ah, my hero! Ah, my best-beloved! you cannot surely hear the ring of contempt in your voice as you say that cruel sentence—you cannot surely know that my cross is heavier far at this moment than it ever has been before, or you would

keep the contempt which you feel for my menial position out of your voice. I know the gulf that divides us is impassable; but have mercy, I can bear no more. For very pain I must cry out, and yet I do not; almost as still, almost as impassive as he, I still sit there till his voice rouses me.

'I asked you to be my wife before I knew this,' he says hoarsely; 'I ask you to be so still—I ask you to leave this horrible life of servitude and come to me now.'

'You are very generous to offer to make such a social sacrifice,' I say stonily. 'And I thank you; but it is quite impossible.'

'Don't say that,' he cries quickly, taking my cold hand in his; 'you have

not ceased to care for me, *cara mia*, have you?'

'I care for you far too much to say anything else.'

'Is that your final decision?' still very eagerly.

'Yes,' I answer, pronouncing my own doom.

'Then I refuse to accept it—it is the answer of pride. The only answer I will accept must come from your heart. If you can truly say you have ceased to care for me, then I will go, and please God never see your face again.'

Ah! Why do we, from the cradle to the grave, persist in crying for the moon? Why is the thing which is denied to us the only thing we want? Oh, perverse human nature! My lover has forgotten

for the time being that a marriage with Lady Trevor's governess appeared so distasteful to him, when it appeared at the same time possible. He only remembers now that he loves me, that he desires beyond all else to make me his wife, because I seem to have drifted so far out of his reach.

'You are deceiving yourself,' I say wearily; 'if I promised to marry you, your pride would suffer as much as mine.'

'Try me,' he cries eagerly. 'Try me.'

But I shake my head.

'Oh, Ruth! you will break my heart if you refuse,' he says piteously.

With a stifled cry I turn away.

'Jeffery, if you have any mercy, any pity in your heart, don't try me too far. I have suffered, and I can bear no more.'

'Then say. "Yes.'"

'I cannot!'—but the words come so faintly he can scarcely hear them.

'Will you think about it, and meet me here to-morrow with your final answer? I will not take it to-day.'

'My answer will be "No" to-morrow, as it is "No" to-day.'

'Then do the last thing I shall ever ask of you: come and say good-bye. Give me one more chance before you shut the light out from me for ever.'

'I cannot come to-morrow, but if you wish it I will come the next day,' I say desperately; 'but in the meantime I am sure you will see I am right.' Then I stretch out my cold trembling hand to him. 'Good-bye,' I say wretchedly.

With a great cry he catches me to him,

and covers my face with wild passionate kisses.

'Oh, darling! I cannot give you up now!' he cries. 'I *will not*. Remember, you have promised to meet me here again—unless you will let me come and see you. That would be best.'

'Oh no, no!' I cry. 'I could not bear them to know about it; you don't know what they are!'

'It shall be as you wish. But you will come? If you do not, you will drive me to something desperate.'

'I will come.'

'And one thing more: promise me that you will not let that fellow Walters make love to you,' jealously.

I smile faintly.

'Of course not.'

'Kiss me once,' he pleads; 'once before you go!'

So I drink the cup of bitterness to the very dregs, and give him my first, and I know my last, kiss in this world, and then I go—go across the meadow with weary, lagging steps, for I know I have parted with all that made life sweet to me.

## CHAPTER VIII.

'We are so tired, my heart and I.'
MRS. BROWNING.

MISS FEATHERSTONE'S injuries are progressing favourably. She is lying on a sofa in the drawing-room, and holding a small court of anxious inquirers.

I am shouting my lungs out down the ear-trumpet of Miss Gay, on the other side of the curtains, endeavouring to convey to her wandering old mind some faint idea of an article on Female Suffrage out of yesterday's *Times*. I have arrived at the end of the second paragraph, and

observe with joy that there is only half a column left.

'Wait a little time,' whispers Miss Gay. 'My arm aches.'

Thankfully I stop, for my throat is very dry, and my voice beginning to be husky.

I can hear that on the other side of the curtains another pilgrim is worshiping at the shrine of the invalid.

'Captain Walters, this is really good of you,' says Miss Featherstone in her habitually languid tones. 'I was wishing you would come and take compassion on my solitude. I do not think I have spoken three words to you for so many days.'

'I hope your ankle is better,' observes the pilgrim,' with scarcely as much anxiety

in his tone as might have been expected under the circumstances.

'Yes, thanks,' very sweetly; 'how good of you to ask.'

'Not very. I do not know that I should have remembered to do so, if I had not seen you lying there.'

There is a pause: then Miss Featherstone speaks again.

'I am afraid you expected to find someone else here, and are disappointed,' she says, and I think I can detect a little venom mixed with the silvery tones of her voice.

'Oh no! certainly not,' returns her companion hastily. 'How could you possibly think so?'

'Well, then, if you are quite sure—*quite* sure it will not be a shocking bore

to you, will you read me one of the "Idylls"? I adore Tennyson, and I am sure you read divinely.'

'I shall be delighted, but—' hesitating, 'I am afraid I can't stay long; I promised to go with Charlie Trevor to look at the kennels.'

'Soon?'

'Yes,' says Captain Walters, guiltily, 'er—— I think so.'

'Then you will not read to me?' in a disappointed tone.

'Oh yes I will, if you like!—but to tell you the truth, I hate reading aloud.'

'Lord Selwin does not!' says Miss Featherstone sharply.

'Of course he does not. I never thought of him!' exclaims Captain Walters, with the greatest alacrity. 'I will go and

fetch him; I am sure he would be charmed.'

'Go on reading now,' whispers Miss Gay.

Once more I raise the trumpet and bellow as before.

I have not arrived at the end of the first line when the curtains are divided, and Captain Walters stands in the opening. As I look up, my eyes catch the mirror before me, and the ludicrous sight the old woman and I present strikes me so forcibly that I laugh.

'What are you blowing down the trumpet for?' asks Miss Gay, raising her eyes quickly. Then she sees Captain Walters.

I suppose the sight of his goodly figure standing there, with a ray of sunlight across his face, brings to her mind some pleasant

recollection of her buried youth. It is difficult to believe toothless, dim-sighted, deaf old age can ever have had anything bright and lovely to look back upon; yet even in the Christmas of life a ray, the ghost of a memory, lights up the wrinkles on time-worn faces, and reminds one that even there it was not always so.

'I beg your pardon,' I say, recovering myself. 'I—I could not help it.'

But she does not hear me; she is holding out a bony claw to the new-comer, and he is clasping it with a degree of fervour which absolutely amazes me.

'Good-morning, Miss Gay,' he shouts vigorously, shaking the extended claw in a way that sets the lace and feather cap on her head wagging jauntily. 'I don't often have the pleasure of a chat with you.'

Then, with an anxious and rapid glance at me, he says, softly :

'How long have you been trying to break a blood-vessel?—you look perfectly exhausted.'

'I am a little tired,' I return, smiling, 'but it is nothing.'

'Go and sit there,' he says, pointing to a chair, 'and give *me* that instrument.'

'Were you talking to me?' asks Miss Gay. 'I am a little deaf.'

Captain Walters seats himself in the chair I have vacated, and puts his mouth to the trumpet.

'I was saying that if you would allow me I would read to you, instead of Miss Fane!'

'Delighted, I am sure!' she says; 'you remind me of Lord Henry Craddock—he

was such a polite young man—when I was a girl, you know.'

'Dead and buried then, these many years, I should hope,' says Captain Walters aside; then, applying himself to the trumpet:

'What was Miss Fane reading?'

'An article about—about—dear me, I forget. Oh, about Bismarck, I think.'

I turn away my head to hide the smile that will rise to my lips in spite of myself.

'Do you go through this every day?' he asks, looking for the article in question.

'Yes, most mornings,' I return, still smiling.

'How *wicked!* No wonder you look ill! Why did you not tell me? I might have helped you,' in an anxious tone. 'I believe you would die rather than tell anyone what you have to bear.'

'What is she saying now?' whispers Miss Gay, turning to Captain Walters.

'She says I have been awkward enough to disarrange your knitting,' he shouts, stooping down and deliberately extracting one of the needles. 'I am awfully sorry, but I have no doubt Miss Fane will be kind enough to remedy the evil.'

'Oh yes, she had better stay here and do it,' says Miss Gay. 'If she takes it upstairs the children will tear it all to pieces.'

He brings the knitting to me, and his face looks very mischievously merry.

'How could you do it?' I say, laughing too; 'it was too bad of you.'

'A mere accident, I assure you,' he observes impressively; 'it will take you some time to get it right again, will not it?'

'I think it will,' I say, looking ruefully at the poor old woman's work.

'That is all right,' he returns, with extreme satisfaction, reseating himself and taking up the trumpet.

'You said Miss Fane was reading an article about Servia, did not you?'

'Yes, yes; that was the one,' says Miss Gay; 'but are you sure, Captain Walters, you do not dislike reading aloud?'

'I enjoy it above all things,' he returns, 'if I can only find some one kind enough to listen to me.'

I know Miss Featherstone can hear every word distinctly. I am afraid Captain Walters does not err on the side of veracity, and glance at the curtains warningly.

The hint seems to amuse him immensely. I think he thoroughly enjoys the idea of

Miss Featherstone's annoyance; then he begins to read in a tone that would raise the roof of a cathedral.

'Not quite so loud,' mildly suggests Miss Gay.

'I beg your pardon.' Aside: 'I thought she was as deaf as a post.'

Then he begins again, and continues without interruption till the article is finished.

'I am afraid my voice tires you,' he says politely, laying down the paper.

'Not at all, I assure you; you read very pleasantly.'

'I devoutly hoped she might go to sleep while I was reading,' he continues, turning to me.

'I don't think it was calculated to bring about such a result,' I say, smiling.

'Well, no, perhaps not. How do you feel now? You do not look quite so tired,' looking earnestly at me.

'Oh no, thank you,' I answer gratefully. 'I am all right now. It was very kind of you to take my place.'

'Please don't say that,' he returns hastily. 'You have no idea how much pleasure it has given me. I wish—I *wish*' —very eagerly—'you would let me help you sometimes.'

'So I will,' I say frankly.

'And you will try to like me a little?'—then, correcting himself: 'I mean, you will speak to me sometimes, and put up with my society now and then?'

'I like you very much,' I say. 'You have been very kind to me.'

'To myself rather.'

'Did anyone tell you what a success you were the other night?' he asks suddenly. 'Everyone was talking about it, and wanting to know who you were. Miss Trevor told me you had taken that part before; was that so?'

'Yes.'

'I wonder who took my part on that occasion?' he says curiously.

'Ah, I wonder!' I say; and then all the old sickening feeling comes over me, for I know that in a few hours I must play out the last act of the romance by the old ruin with one solitary spectator—the last act before the curtain falls.

## CHAPTER IX.

'Love is of man's life a thing apart;
'Tis woman's whole existence.'

SHAKESPEARE.

IT is evening, and Jack and I are sitting in the big oriel window. We have watched the sun sink in the far west farther and farther behind the distant hills—we have listened to the wind sighing and moaning round the house as if mourning over the sins and sorrows of a tired, never-resting world—we have discussed the probable size of the shoe in which the old woman resided, and the number of children it con-

tained; and now we are silent, and the flickering firelight is falling on our faces, and making fantastic shadows on the wall.

I look at my boy, wondering if he has fallen asleep, and then I see that the big eyes are open, and that there is the old, old wonder in them.

'What are you thinking of, Jack?' I ask.

'I was thinking how much I loved you,' he says dreamily. 'If you were to leave me I should die.'

'But I am not going to leave you, dear.'

His hand tightens on mine.

'No one loves me but you,' he says, stroking my face.

'Hush! you must not say that. You have many people to love you.'

'Have you many people to love *you*?'

'No,' I answer, with a dull aching at my heart; 'only you, Jack; no one else.'

'Did no one ever love you?'

'I—I—yes, Jack.'

'Some one nice?

'Yes—very nice.'

'And don't they love you now?' asks the child.

'Some of them are dead,' I say, with a choking sensation in my throat.

'And the others?—they are not *all* dead?'

'No—not all of them.'

'Then don't they love you as much as they did?'

'I don't know,' I say, trying to steady my voice.

'Perhaps they care for some one else?' suggests Jack.

'No, no!' I cry, with a great sob. 'I do not think so.'

'What is the matter?' asks the child wonderingly. 'Your face is quite wet. You are *crying*.'

'I believe I must have been,' I say, smiling. 'Now let us go and play the lullaby till tea comes, shall we?'

* * * * *

'You will come and kiss me again when you come to bed?' says a little white-robed figure with his arms about my neck; 'and you will not let mamma and the other people keep you long?'

'No, darling; I shall soon be back again. Now you must lie down and try to sleep.'

'Promise to come!'

'Yes—I promise.'

'Let me look at you,' says Jack, taking

my face between his tiny hands. 'You are not crying now?'

'Not a bit,' I say gaily. 'See, I am laughing.' And I make a hollow attempt at mirth that does not even deceive Jack.

'You are not really laughing,' he says; 'you are only 'tending.'

'Good-bye,' I say, kissing him again; and then I turn away and go down to the drawing-room.

Lady Trevor, resplendent in black velvet, diamonds and point-lace, is reclining in a capacious chair, and fanning herself with an artistic arrangement of ivory and feathers. Mrs. Sinclair is talking eagerly to Mrs. Ellistone—probably the last bit of fashionable scandal forms the subject of their conversation. Sir John and Colonel Sinclair are discussing in rather loud tones

the advisability of reforming the game laws. Miss Featherstone half reclining on the sofa in an airy costume of white muslin and pink ribbons, has the last pilgrim, in the shape of Charlie Trevor, in attendance. Florence and Lord Selwin are indulging in what appears to be an extremely amusing *tête-à-tête*, to judge from their faces, and poor Captain Walters is paying dearly for any pleasure which he may have enjoyed in the morning, by howling a few feeble observations, *viâ* the trumpet, into Miss Gay's ear. On a chair beside the piano sits Lady Mabel Causton, and balancing himself on the music-stool, talking to her, is Sir Jeffery Walsingham.

A keen pang of I know not what shoots through my heart. Sir Jeffrey turns as I approach the piano; for one moment he

looks at me, then without a word he rises and goes to the low chair on the other side of Lady Mabel. The next moment Captain Walters is beside me.

'Let me turn over the leaves,' he is saying eagerly.

'There are none to turn over, thank you,' I reply, smiling; 'I am going to play from memory.'

'That means I am to go back to Miss Gay,' with a doleful grimace; 'don't be so unkind as to send me back. I shall not trouble you with conversation. I can scarcely utter a sound; my throat is frightfully sore with yelling through that horrible instrument.'

'I was afraid your good nature would lead you into trouble,' I say, smiling.

'My good nature, as you call it, was of

a very selfish description. I would do a great deal more than that for another half-hour like I had this morning.'

This, while Jeffery is listening and biting his moustache savagely. I run my fingers lightly over the keys.

'Did Lady Trevor express any wish as regards my choice of music for to-night?' I say, looking at Florence.

'No, but play something lively,' she says, half turning her head; 'I dare say mamma will give her orders presently.'

Without looking at him, I *feel* that Jeffery winces.

Then, possessed by I know not what, I dash into the march that the band played a year ago, when we were skating by torch-light. Gradually the conversation lulls. Colonel Sinclair's head and Captain

Walter's foot are beating time to the music. Lady Trevor's head, too, is nodding suspiciously behind her fan. Mrs. Ellistone and Mrs. Sinclair have taken refuge in crewel-work, and Miss Allington is holding a skein of wool for Miss Gay to wind.

I look up at Jeffery, and meet his eyes fixed on my face with an anxious appealing look in them, and then I find I have unconsciously drifted into the "Blue Danube," and that something like tears are in my eyes.

'Does not Miss Fane play well?' says the loud voice of Florence Trevor addressing Sir Jeffery.

He starts, pulls himself together, and says stiffly:

'Remarkably well!' and then he turns to Lady Mabel and begins talking as before.

'Why did you play that march?' asks Captain Walters.

I had forgotten he was standing beside me. I think I had even forgotten his existence. I know Jeffery is listening for the answer, and in my confusion I answer helplessly:

'Oh, I don't know; you said you liked it the other day—did not you?'

'How very good of you to remember!' he says, with a glad light in his eyes.

'Come into the conservatory,' says Jeffery, hastily addressing Lady Mabel; 'this room is insufferably hot; I feel as if I could not breathe in it.'

'Won't you play something else?' asks Captain Walters.

'Oh yes!' I say desperately, as I watch their retreating figures; 'anything you like.'

'Play something from "Faust,"' says Florence. 'I adore operatic music; don't you, Lord Selwin?'

'I worship it!' returns his lordship, with extreme gusto.

Once more I place my fingers on the keys, and put my whole soul into the "Soldier's Chorus."

Before I have finished it I see Lady Mabel and Sir Jeffery standing in the doorway. As the last note dies away Miss Featherstone says cuttingly and distinctly:

'Miss Fane is especially devoted to martial music this evening. I hope Colonel Sinclair and,' with a little pause, 'Captain Walters appreciate the compliment.'

The shaft has certainly gone home, and Miss Featherstone's revenge is complete. Captain Walter's face flushes crimson, and

he murmurs something not very polite below his breath. Sir Jeffery turns white to the lips, and honours Miss Featherstone with a cold contemptuous stare.

'You have given me a great treat this evening,' says Colonel Sinclair, coming up to the piano. 'Music like that takes me back to the days when I was a young fellow, like Walters here. It makes me wish to be in harness again. By-the-bye, Walters, what is this I hear about your selling out?'

And the two men move away together.

'Sing that little French song, Miss Fane,' says Lady Trevor, waking up.

Another old recollection; another link in the chain that unites Jeffery so closely with me.

I brace myself with an effort and

begin. As the old refrain dies on my lips, I am conscious that Jeffery has taken Captain Walters' place, and is standing close beside me. I can feel his breath across my face. I can see his fingers trembling as they close tightly round the roll of music which he holds in his hand.

'Why do you let that fellow make such desperate love to you?' he says savagely. 'It drives me mad! It almost makes me doubt you! This horrible state of things must end at once.'

'Hush!' I say faintly. 'They will hear you.'

Without a word he bows stiffly and walks away.

I play two or three more pieces, and then Lady Trevor says:

'That will do for this evening, Miss Fane.'

By some chance Jeffrey is standing against the door. He opens it.

'Remember three o'clock to-morrow,' he says.

Then I pass out and go to Jack.

## CHAPTER X.

'In aught that tries the heart,
How few will stand the proof!'
*Childe Harold.*

'Miss Fane, what does being "awfully spoony" mean?' cried Mabel, running into the schoolroom and tumbling over the rug in her haste.

'Nothing that you would understand,' I say, laughing.

'Because I heard Florence talking to Miss Featherstone this morning, and she said Sir Jeffrey Walsingham seemed awfully spoony on Lady Mabel.'

'You should not listen to and repeat what people talk about,' I say, with a dull aching at my heart. 'Your sister would be very angry with you if she knew. Now run and play with Jack.'

'Miss Fane,' says Florence, appearing in the doorway, 'we are going to a ball at Lord Cranbrook's this evening, and I find the frills on my Indian silk are wretchedly tumbled. I know you quill them up so beautifully—so much better than Parker—that I have had them ironed and put on the bed for you to do. It is rather a lengthy operation, but I know you will not mind that. Now, go and get them done as soon as you can, there's a good girl.'

My heart sinks like lead.

This afternoon! Then I cannot fulfil

my promise. I cannot meet Jeffery! What will he think? I look at the clock in despair. I cannot possibly get the dress done in time.

'I had better begin them at once,' I say, rising quickly.

'Yes, do,' she replies, leaving the room.

With trembling hands and feverish haste I begin my work. One, two, three, four little flounces to make and put on.

'I cannot possibly do it,' I say over and over again, as if I were repeating a lesson; and then the cotton breaks, and a dull pain comes in my head.

Again I look at the clock; it is half-past two, and there are two more flounces yet to make. I prick my fingers every other minute in my haste to finish the dress; but it is four o'clock before I put

in the last stitch and rise with a sick, miserable weight at my heart.

He has been waiting there so long—so long waiting and hoping—and has gone away angry, no doubt; believing there is no truth in woman. I wonder what he meant by driving him to something desperate—marrying Lady Mabel, perhaps; or going away for years and never seeing my face again!

Oh! what did he mean?

I wring my hands in despair. Then the thought comes, perhaps he is waiting there still. I run to my room, seize my hat and jacket, and fly downstairs. He *may* be there — it may not yet be too late.

With a white, anxious face and trembling limbs, I hurry along the garden; then I

gain the stile and climb over; now I am in the field with the cows.

I do not notice till I get into the middle of the field, that, since my last expedition to the ruin, an addition has been made to its occupants in the shape of a large black bull of ferocious aspect, who obviously resents my trespassing on his domains. Now, in my bravest moments I have an intense horror of bulls, and, without stopping to think, I take undignified refuge in flight.

The animal is gaining on me at every step; still I rush madly on, till my strength seems to give way; I feel I am reeling giddily, and the next moment I fall senseless into somebody's arms. Then there is a blank, and when I open my eyes, I find my head resting on Captain Walters'

shoulder, and his white scared face looking anxiously into mine.

'Are you better?' he asks quickly.

'Yes,' I say faintly. 'I suppose I was too late—was not I?' looking helplessly round.

'You would have been, if I had not been here,' he says, with a shudder. 'That brute had almost overtaken you when you fainted. Thank Heaven, I dragged you through the gate in time!'

I put my hand to my head and try to think.

'Oh, I remember now,' I say, with a shiver; 'it was the bull.'

His arm is still supporting me, and my head resting on his shoulder.

'What is that?' I cry, suddenly raising my head and looking wildly round. 'I am sure I heard a step.'

'No, no; there was no one,' he says, reluctantly disengaging his arm from around my waist. 'Your nerves are shaken—you fancy. Walsingham was here a few minutes ago, but he is far enough away now. I can just see a glimpse of the Trevor's phaeton through the trees; I should think he is talking to Lady Mabel, perhaps.'

'He must have seen it all,' I say wretchedly, tottering as fast as my trembling legs will carry me to the gate.

Captain Walters follows me.

'And, if he did, what does it matter?' he asks quickly. 'I suppose anyone with a grain of sense would know that I could scarcely see you pursued by a bull and not render you any assistance in my power.'

'I wish you had been a hundred miles away!' I cry angrily; 'at the ends of the earth—anywhere but here! Why—why did you not let me faint by myself, on the ground, or in a ditch? How dare you put your hateful arm round me?'

'Don't you think you are a little unreasonable?' he says, his eyes flashing. 'How could I see you killed, and never stretch out a hand to help you? If you had been a milkmaid I could do no less.'

'I suppose not,' I answer wearily, as my anger evaporates. 'I wish I had died instead—that is all.'

'I am sorry I have incurred your displeasure,' he says coldly; then, coming a step nearer: 'Are you afraid Sir Jeffrey

will mention having seen us together to Lady Trevor?'

'No!' I cry bitterly; 'I do not think he will speak of it to anyone.'

'Then I cannot see that much harm is done,' still coldly regarding me.

'Probably not,' I say in a husky whisper, turning away my face, on which a dull, mute despair has fallen; 'but you do not understand.'

'Are you going on towards the ruin?' he asks quickly.

'No,' I reply, with my eyes on the purple rays of the setting sun; 'I am going home—I mean to the Hall.'

Then I turn to the gate and open it. Captain Walters hurriedly stops me.

'You shall not go that way!' he says, in a tone of command. 'You are mad to

dream of it; the probabilities are that you will be killed.'

'I do not know any other way,' I say, raising my dull eyes once more to his face. 'I am not afraid now.'

'I forbid you to attempt it,' he says decidedly. 'You must put up with my *hateful* presence for a little way, until you get on the road, and then you can find your way back alone.'

I turn without a word. Nothing seems to matter now. I do not care which way I go—it is all one to me.

We walk the length of the field together in silence; then we come to a stile leading into the road.

'Can you climb over by yourself?' he asks, without looking round.

'Yes; I think so.'

He gets over the stile, and walks slowly in front, I scrambling after him.

As he hears the pattering of my feet on the road, he turns sharply.

'That is your way,' he says, indicating the direction with his hand; 'if you keep straight on, and then take the first turn to the left, you will soon be home.'

And, raising his hat, he turns in the opposite direction, and in a few minutes is out of sight.

I walk on and wonder, in a dull apathetic sort of way, if I shall ever see Jeffery again. Perhaps we shall meet when the flood of years has passed over our heads; when he is married, and I—I wonder what I shall be: old and ugly, perhaps, and unlovable, and he will wonder how he could ever have cared for me.

I am home now; and having dashed my face with cold water, go downstairs to see if I am required by Miss Gay.

I find her in the drawing-room, with Florence and Miss Featherstone.

'Auntie was just asking for you,' says Florence, addressing me; 'she wants you to do something to her knitting.'

I take the half-finished stocking in my hand and sit down.

Florence and her friend return to their interrupted conversation, and continue it in whispers.

Presently the sound of men's voices falls on our ears, and Captain Walters and Lord Selwin enter by the conservatory.

'By-the-bye, Miss Fane,' says Miss Featherstone, in her languid tones, 'I quite forgot to ask you how you were, till

the sight of Captain Walters reminded me what a very interesting escapade you had this afternoon.'

I feel my face is flushing painfully.

'I am quite well, thank you,' I return, without looking up.

'What do you mean, Julia?' inquires Miss Trevor; 'what has been happening to Miss Fane?'

'Oh, I forgot to tell you!' says Miss Featherstone, with a laugh. 'Well, you know, Charlie was amiable enough to drive me out for a little time this afternoon, and just as we arrived at the field where the ruin is, what should I see but poor Miss Fane taking rather an undignified header into the outstretched arms of Captain Walters, who, like the hero in a novel, was of course in the right place at

the right moment; rather a curious coincidence, was not it? Miss Fane, it seems, had attracted the attentions of a not too amiable bull, who resented her trespassing on his domains, and was doing his best to banish all intruders.'

'It was a very fortunate thing I happened to stay so long chatting to Walsingham,' says Captain Walters, biting his lip. 'If no one had been there, probably Miss Fane would have been killed!'

'It was indeed a fortunate accident,' sneers Miss Featherstone, laying the slightest possible stress on the word accident.

'Poor dear Miss Fane!' exclaims Florence, laughing. Then, turning to me inquisitively, 'But what on earth were you doing in the field?—where were you going?'

I can feel that Captain Walters looks quickly at me, and I know the same question has been perplexing him, and that he is listening eagerly for the answer.

Before I can reply, Miss Featherstone chimes in :

'Taking a country walk, of course ! Where do you suppose Miss Fane could possibly be going?—to keep an appointment with a friend ?'

Captain Walters starts, and a look of keen pain comes into his face.

'The former suggestion is certainly the most likely to be the correct one,' I say, slowly raising my head ; 'because I have not a friend in the world.'

'How very ungrateful of you, Miss Fane!' exclaims the fair Julia. 'Have you forgotten the gallant way in which

Captain Walters rescued you? By-the-bye, you must have been very much exhausted—I noticed you remained in his arms for a considerable time after you and the bull were on opposite sides of the gate; really, Florence, you should not have missed it—it was altogether quite interesting.'

'Miss Fane fainted,' interposes Captain Walters hotly. 'I suppose you would not have had me leave her on the ground till she came round?—although she was very angry with me for not doing so.'

'We must take your word for that, must not we?' says Miss Featherstone irritatingly. 'It just shows how appearances deceive one!' with a careless laugh. 'Now, if I had been a stranger, and had not known all about it, I should certainly

have thought Miss Fane and Captain Walters were lovers indulging in a long and affectionate embrace. I suggested the idea to Sir Jeffery Walsingham at the time, and he quite agreed with me ; but then he did not see the bull catastrophe, so there was a great excuse for him, was there not?'

'He might have seen it,' says Captain Walters sharply.

'Of course he might, if his face, instead of his back, had been towards you; if I had not called his attention to the interesting episode afterwards, I don't suppose he would have seen that either; but it was really too good to be lost.'

'I do not think it is a subject for exercising your small stock of wit upon,' says Captain Walters, his voice shaking with suppressed rage. 'If you had been in

Miss Fane's place, you would not have thought it so amusing.'

'I am sure I should not,' retorts Miss Featherstone. 'I was not at all ambitious to change places with Miss Fane.'

'Now, Julia, I will not let you tease any more,' exclaims Florence, regarding the flashing eyes and white lips of Captain Walters with some alarm. 'You are really too bad, my dear.'

'Flo darling, don't scold me,' pleads Miss Featherstone, smiling sweetly; 'one must do something, and Captain Walters is the best-tempered man in the world, you know, and enjoys being chaffed.'

'I quite agree with Miss Trevor,' breaks in Lord Selwin, unexpectedly coming to the rescue. 'Come along, Walters, and have a cigar before dinner.'

Then they leave the room, and I still sit there, busy with Miss Gay's knitting, busy with the thought of that retreating figure on which my eyes may never again rest.

The voices of my companions seem to come to me from a long way off.

* * * * *

It is evening, and I am once more in the drawing-room. Lady Trevor's guests are seated in various parts of the room, flirting, talking and gossiping, as the case may be.

Captain Walters sits alone, slowly turning over the leaves of a book of prints, and looking moody and angry.

Once I meet his eyes fixed inquiringly on my face, but he instantly drops them and returns to the book as before.

'By-the-bye,' says the jovial voice of Sir John, addressing me, 'I meant to ask you to sing that hawking song, something about following the birds of the air, you know! It has a capital swing with it, and all that; I remember being struck with it the other night. Eh! what do you want?' turning hastily to the footman, who has entered, and is presenting a letter to him on a silver tray. 'Who is this from?'

'One of Sir Jeffery Walsingham's grooms has just brought it,' replies the demure serving man.

'Oh! will you excuse me?' says Sir John, turning to the two or three ladies nearest to him. 'Something about the meet to-morrow, no doubt.'

I press my fingers tightly together to hide the trembling that has come over me,

for I know the answer to my oft-repeated question, '*What did he mean?*' is contained in that letter.

'Oh! what is this?' exclaims Sir John. 'Something or other up, I fancy. Walsingham went off to London this evening; gives no reason for doing so, but says he shall very likely go abroad again for an indefinite time—that his plans are altered.'

'How very extraordinary!' says Lord Selwin. 'He told me distinctly on the night of the theatricals that he was tired of travelling, and had quite made up his mind to settle down for good.'

Lady Mabel turns pale, and says:

'I think there must be some mistake; he promised to stay with us in town shortly.'

'Well, that is what he says,' remarks Sir John, waving the letter airily; 'perhaps he will think better of it, and come back. I think this determination must have been arrived at suddenly.'

'Perhaps a wife has turned up unexpectedly,' laughs Charlie Trevor.

Lady Mabel turns a trifle paler at the suggestion.

'Well, your lion has departed,' says Miss Featherstone; 'for my part, I think he is no loss—he always seemed to me rather a bear.'

'That was probably because you had no opportunity of judging,' says Lady Mabel, sharply. 'I don't think I ever saw him speak to you.'

'I almost wonder he did not ride over to say good-bye!' murmurs Lady Trevor.

Involuntarily I raise my eyes to Captain Walters' face. He is steadily regarding me, but there is no longer a look of inquiry on his face, only intense pain and hopeless longing that strikes an answering cord in my heart, and for the first time in my life I feel sorry for him.

Sir John has moved away from the piano; he has forgotten the song—Sir Jeffery's letter seems to have put it out of his head.

Suddenly Captain Walters rises, and says something to Lady Trevor; then he comes to me.

'Miss Fane,' he says, still with the same look in his kind eyes, 'we have come to the conclusion that you have been on the rack long enough to-day, so we have unselfishly denied ourselves the

pleasure of any more music to-night. I have Lady Trevor's permission to say so.'

'Thank you!' I say gratefully, raising my dull eyes to his face; 'you are very kind.'

'For heaven's sake go and rest!' he says hoarsely.

I rise from the music-stool and totter to the door. I shall never know quite how I managed to get there; my head is reeling giddily. As I reach the door I stagger forward and almost lose my balance; then I see Captain Walters half stretch out his arm towards me. I recover myself with a shudder, and pass out.

'So Jeffery is gone!' I say, throwing myself on my bed; 'gone with his last recollection of me in the arms of another

man! Gone, believing me heartless and cruel, and I shall never see him any more. *Never!* I only meant to say good-bye. It was hard, oh! so hard not to be able to say that. Oh, my poor, sad, loving Jeffery! don't think too hardly of me, for I love you—I love you—I love you!'

And so crying, I sob myself into a heavy dreamless sleep.

## CHAPTER XI.

'The fancy flattered my mind,
And again seemed over bold;
Now I thought she cared for me,
Now I thought she was kind,
Only because she was cold.'

*Maud.*

'I HAVE something so good to tell you,' says Jack, coming into the schoolroom and slipping his tiny hand in mine; 'and now you will not cry any more, will you?'

Two days have elapsed since Jeffery's departure. I have seen very little of Captain Walters during the time; he

seems rather to avoid me. He has been extremely quiet, too, and not often joined in the general conversation when he could help it; but he has read to Miss Gay for a whole hour every day, and even held the wool for her to wind, to the intense amusement and delight of Charlie Trevor; while I have sat in a chair opposite, and wondered vaguely where Jeffery was, and if I should live to be as old as Miss Gay, and become as troublesome.

'What have you got to tell me, Jack?' I ask, stroking his soft shining hair.

'Why, that I think somebody does love you; so it is all right.'

'What do you mean?' I say, smiling.

He climbs on my knee, and puts both arms round my neck.

'I told Captain Walters, when we was quite alone,' continues Jack, regardless of grammar, 'that you cried the other night because you had no one to love you but me, and that somebody did love you once, but they were dead now, and so you did cry; and I asked him to love you, and then you would not cry any more.'

'Jack,' I say, 'you should not; what would he think?' and I put my hand to my burning face.

'He said, "She would not care for my love, little Jack;" and then he sighed and turned away his head; and I told him that he was quite wrong, for I was sure you would be very glad of it, indeed. 'And he looked oh, so funny! and said, "Would she?" as if he could not believe it; and then he put me off his knee, and began

walking up and down the room very quickly, and I came to tell you.'

'Jack,' I say, kissing him, 'you must not ask anyone to love me any more—do you understand?'

'Yes,' he returns, looking disappointed; 'I thought you would be *glad*.'

I kiss him again, and he climbs down from my knee sadly, and goes to the pug, which is lying on the hearthrug; and sitting down beside it, strokes its head gently and gazes into the fire.

There is a long silence; then Miss Allington comes in.

'Ruth,' she says, coming up to me and laying her hand on my head, 'what is the matter? I wish you would tell me.'

'Nothing much,' I reply, trying to smile back in her kind face; 'nothing that

can be mended, only what must be endured.'

'Do you know,' she says, sitting down beside me, 'I am rather troubled about you; you look so horribly ill, and there are big dark circles round your eyes that tell of restless nights and a heartache.'

'Yes,' I answer, smiling wearily; 'but it is not an uncommon complaint, is it? I don't think I ought to complain. For twenty years I did not know what the pain was like.'

'Will you do something to please me?'

'Yes; anything I can.'

'Well, then, go and put on your hat, and take a good walk, and leave these little people to me.'

Suddenly a thought strikes me. I will go to the ruin.

'Yes, I will go,' I say, rising and leaving the room.

I am soon ready, and on the road to the ruin. I do not go by the fields to-day; I have no fancy for a second encounter with my old enemy, the bull.

My walk is not a long one. I am soon at the stile, and over it.

Yes; there is the trysting-place where he showered such wild passionate kisses on my trembling lips; there, too, is the place where he was watching and waiting that long and weary day that ended so fatally —watching and waiting for some one that never came; and then going into the world once again with naught to cling to but a broken promise.

I sit down upon the heap of stones that will henceforth be so painfully con-

nected with the severance of the last link of the chain that bound me and my old life together, and, putting my hand to my aching head, try to think.

'How wicked I am, and selfish!' I say at length. 'I do not seem to imagine that anyone has the heartache but me; and I dare say many people are more miserable and desolate than I.'

And then the look of suffering on Captain Walters' face last night rises before me, and I think how unkind and ungrateful I was to him, when, after all, he could not help being the innocent cause of what happened.

I remember saying I hated him; and, in spite of it, he has continued to show me nothing but kindness since. I think gratefully of my deliverance from the

drawing-room on that wretched evening that seems such years ago now; of the two hours' reading to Miss Gay that he has saved me at certainly great discomfort to himself. I think of the thousand ways in which he has helped me; and my heart softens to him.

Then I raise my eyes, and my heart gives a wild throb, for I see a man's figure coming towards me.

The ground is covered with fresh fallen snow, and I cannot hear his footsteps; but he comes on and on.

'Jeffery!' I cry, blindly tottering forward over the untrodden snow, 'I could not come before;' and then I stop myself with a gasp, for my eyes have played me false: it is not Jeffery, but Captain Walters coming towards me.

He does not speak; but his face looks very pale. He takes my trembling hands in his, and leads me gently back to the stones.

'I followed you,' he says at length hoarsely, 'because I could not bear it any longer. Ruth,' passionately clasping my cold hands, 'is it possible the child was right? Will you really be glad to know that I love you with all my heart and soul? Look at me, darling; I know I am mad to dream of it, but, in pity's name, do not tell me it is quite hopeless.'

I disengage my hands from his with a shudder.

'You must have known it, you must have seen it all along,' he goes on excitedly. 'From the first moment I saw

you, I thought you the most beautiful woman I had ever seen; and then your sweet patient ways, the slights and insults you had to bear, the dumb suffering in your eyes, these have made me love you, as I swear no other man can ever love you.'

I look at his handsome pleading face; it is very pale, and his eyes have a desperate look in them, like those of a man begging for dear life, and as I look at him I know what he is saying is true. Probably no man will ever love me as he loves me—but what is that to me?

'It is quite, *quite* hopeless,' I say, shaking my head. 'I can never marry you.'

'Oh! my darling,' he groans, with a dull agony in his face and voice. 'Why

will you not try to like me? If you cannot love me, marry me without. You could not remain indifferent to such love as mine long; it must touch your heart some day, and I would wait and hope such long, long years for one gleam at last. What is your life now?' he goes on eagerly; 'it is one long torture—everything is antagonistic to your feelings—it is a loveless round of drudgery that is killing you If you would only listen to me, if you would only give it up and come to me, you should have everything in the world you wanted.'

'Stop,' I cry, springing up and facing him. 'I have told you I cannot, and I will not marry you, is not that sufficient? What is the good of talking of impossibilities!'

'For God's sake don't look at me like that!' he says huskily. 'You told me once that you hated me, and I was mad to hope your feelings would have changed. I know I ought to have been satisfied with that, for you looked every word you said; but try not to be more cruel to me than you can help—it cannot be in your sweet nature to take pleasure in inflicting pain, even upon the most contemptible reptile that crawls.'

'I don't want to give you pain,' I say, all the anger dying out of my heart. 'But I would rather *die* than marry you.'

'Because you love some one else?'

'Yes, because I love some one else,' I repeat wearily.

'You came here that day to meet him,' he goes on, in the same tone as before.

He is not looking at me now: his eyes are looking dreamily a long way ahead of me; during the last few minutes his face seems to have aged—it looks like the face of a man who has had a great blow.

'Yes.'

'I thought as much,' he continues dreamily; 'an old lover, and a return to the old life.'

'What is the good of raking it all up again?' I say; 'it is over and done with for ever, and he is gone.'

'I can read it all now,' he says, still looking before him; 'it is the old story. You are going to waste all your sweet young life pining for a man who has stolen your heart, and then thrown it away from him like a faded flower or an old glove.'

'He did not,' I cry petulantly; 'it

was all my fault; he asked me to marry him, and I refused.'

'You did?' turning sharply round, and bringing his eyes back to my face. 'Why?'

'He asked me to marry him before he knew that my life was altered, before he knew I was a governess,' bitterly. 'He could not withdraw afterwards, however much he might have wished; but I had too much under pride to let him make the sacrifice. Then he asked me to meet him that day to say "yes," or to say "good-bye,'" I continue, with a choking feeling in my throat, 'and I could not get here till it was too late, and—' sighing wearily, 'you know the rest——'

'Then it was a misunderstanding altogether?'

'Yes.'

'Why did you not write to him and explain?'

'I had no time; you forget he left home that same evening.'

'Write to him now.'

'I do not know his address.'

'I wonder if the servants know it,' he says musingly; 'he would probably tell them the name of a club at which letters would find him.'

'What would be the use of it,' I say wretchedly; 'if he had been very anxious to see me he would have waited, he would have tried again.'

'You forget,' says Captain Walters, with a great effort, 'where and how he last saw you.'

'Ah, true!' I say, with a shudder; 'he would not come back after that.'

And then it strikes me as odd, for the first time, that I am talking to this man, who a few moments ago declared such passionate love for me, talking to him of Jeffery; and a great wonder fills my heart at the way he has laid aside his own sorrow to share mine.

'I will never annoy you any more,' he says humbly, with a hopeless smile. 'You will try to forget that I ever presumed to fancy things might be different, and—' nervously half-stretching out his hand—'you will not mind my staying on a little time longer at the Hall? I may be able to do something to save you sometimes, and make it a little easier for you. I will go away to-morrow, if you wish it, but if not—if you are quite indifferent about it—I would rather stay.'

'I think I am quite indifferent,' I say, putting my hand in his with a smile. 'But do not you think it would be best for you to go quite away? You would forget me then.'

'Forget!' he cries. 'Is that your idea of love? Do you not think that I would ten thousand times rather be near you, with the chance of making your life one feather's weight easier to you, if the sight of your despairing face wrung my heart as no other torture could do every hour of the day, than be away from you, knowing that you were dying, dying slowly, and that I could not stretch out a hand to help you? Perhaps,' with a sickly smile, 'you may not hate me quite so much when I go away, and that will be worth a great deal of pain.'

'I do not hate you now,' I say. 'I think you have been kinder to me than anyone in the world, and I am very grateful——'

'Don't!' he says, stretching out his hand as if to ward off a blow. 'I can bear anything but kind words from you. Don't you know, feeling as you do now, that is the one thing that will kill me?'

'Good-bye,' I say sadly. 'I must go now.'

'I will not go with you. You will not mind going alone?'

'No,' I say, smiling, and am about to add 'I would rather,' but I stop myself in time.

'I am going to see if I can get Sir Jeffery's address,' he says, turning away his head, 'and if I can, you will write to

him to-night, and I will get the letter posted without anyone being the wiser; perhaps it may not yet be too late.'

At his words a wild thrill of joy shoots through my breast; then he takes my hand once more in his, and holds it in his firm, warm grasp.

'Good-bye,' he says softly, and he goes; and I know, as I watch his retreating figure, that love fought and won the victory. Human nature could do no more.

## CHAPTER XII.

Like an Æolian harp, that wakes
No certain air, but overtakes
Far thought with music that it makes.'

* * * * *

'Such seemed the whisper at my side:
"What is it thou knowest, sweet voice?" I cried.
"A hidden hope," the voice replied.'

*The Two Voices.*

I RETRACE my steps homewards, feeling an undue gladness at my heart. Why? because I am going to write good-bye to Jeffery? Surely that is not likely to make me glad? Ah, miserable, foolish little heart! why are you deceiving yourself? why are you saying it will be good-bye, when you hope

with every breath you draw that it will bring him back again? You say over and over to yourself that you only want him to know you did not break your promise, and still to believe in you, and then say good-bye for ever. Then why are you so glad? Because in spite of yourself there is a grain of hope left yet.

My step seems lighter—I no longer drag my body over the shining white snow, but seem almost to fly through the air for very gladness. My numb fingers are beginning to tingle as the warm blood circulates through them, my cheeks too are glowing, and my breath comes quickly with the exertion of fast walking. I encounter Miss Allington in the hall.

'What have you done to yourself?' she says, with a surprised smile. 'You look

degrees better than you did an hour ago My prescription has worked a cure in one dose.'

'Yes,' I answer gaily; 'the air is perfectly intoxicating. I feel a different being——'

Then I turn away, for I know I am a hypocrite, and that it is not the air at all, but the knowledge that Jeffery will know the truth at last, and that in a few hours' time he may be on his way back to me—the knowledge that if he were to ask me again to be his wife, my heart and every fibre of my being must cry, in spite of me, 'Yes.'

I go to my room and throw my hat on the bed; then I look at myself in the glass. Truly, hope is a wonderful doctor. My eyes are bright, with such a glad, happy

light in them; my cheeks, glowing with my late exertion, have put on their best holiday pink, and my lips are parted in a smile. I smooth the soft coils of my brown hair that the wind has ruffled, and go downstairs.

Captain Walters cannot possibly be back for an hour from the time he started—four miles in that time is very good walking—and his inquiries at Walsingham Castle must delay him a few minutes longer.

I walk restlessly to the window and look out, as if my waiting, watching presence would speed him on his way.

Almost before the time is up, I see him coming down the avenue, and my heart gives a great leap, and then seems to stand still.

I am in the drawing-room alone, some

of the others having driven to Bidsley (the nearest town) on a shopping expedition, and the remainder dispersed and wandered to the various occupations that interested them most.

I think Captain Walters sees me almost as soon as I see him, for he comes straight through the conservatory into the drawing-room.

As I raise my anxious eyes to his face, I know by the smile about his mouth that his errand has been so far successful.

'It is all right,' he says; 'I have got the address of his club; you can write to him to-night.'

And then my heart smites me; for, in spite of the smile about his mouth, there is such a hopeless ring in his voice, and such a settled despair in his eyes, I know that

the shallow attempt at gaiety is but another sacrifice willingly, unselfishly offered.

'But supposing,' I say, with a shudder, 'the post should be too late; supposing he leaves London to-night, or early to-morrow?'

'I have thought of that,' he answers, a quick spasm of pain crossing his face; 'and to avoid any possibility of a mistake, if you will trust me, I will be your post-man. If he is in London, he shall have the letter to-night.'

'Do you mean that you are really going to London to-day?'

'Yes; I have looked out the train. It goes at six something. I must find Sir John, or Charlie, and see if I can be sent to the station. Go and write your letter;

and, if you have no opportunity of giving it to me, put it in the pocket of my ulster —it is hanging in the hall.'

'Yes,' I answer gratefully; and then I stretch out my hand to him, and look up into the face that was so merry a short time ago.

I remember thinking when I first saw him what a heart-whole, sunny expression he had; and as I look at him now, I know that whatever his life is in the future, he will lie in his coffin without that look ever crossing his face again. He may be quietly, contentedly happy, but never carelessly, radiantly heart-whole again. *That* has passed out of his life for evermore.

'I wish,' I say, with a great pity in my heart, which makes me for a moment oblivious even of my own joy, 'that you

had never seen me; why can't you hate me? I am not worth your caring for: indeed, *indeed*, I am not!' with my large eyes still raised to his.

'Child!' he cries, grasping the hand I hold out to him, 'you told me a little time ago not to talk of impossibilities. Don't you know I can no more live without loving you than I can live without breathing? If I had never seen you, I should not have known such wild, mad happiness —or such unutterable woe!'

He drops my hand and turns away with a groan; and I go and write my letter.

I tell Jeffery it was all a wretched mistake; that I did come to meet him; and that I was too late. I tell him how Captain Walters saved my life; and then I tell him I was coming only to say

'Good-bye;' that my heart is broken, and ask him to think kindly of me, and *believe* me.

It is a piteous little letter, a foolish little letter—what you will; but my soul is in it, and surely, *surely* he must believe me.

Then I fold it up, and press my hungry lips to the paper that his fingers will touch.

Some one says the pith of a letter is always contained in the postscript. Perhaps it is so; perhaps, when I put at the end of my letter: 'Will you send me one line to say you believe and forgive me?' it is the waving reed on which all my hopes rest.

I can hear that the driving-party have already returned, so probably I shall have

no opportunity of giving Captain Walters the letter.

I hurry to the hall, slip the letter into his coat, and then go to Miss Gay and her knitting in the drawing-room.

They are all there: the ladies have not yet doffed their out-door wraps, but are enjoying that modern luxury, so dear to the female heart, afternoon tea.

I slip into a corner between Miss Allington and Miss Gay, and devote myself to the everlasting knitting.

'Well, I am sorry to lose you, Walters,' says the cheery voice of Sir John; 'but it won't be for long, you say; you will be back in time for dinner to-morrow.'

'Oh yes,' he replied. 'I am certain to come back.'

'I will send the dogcart to meet you,'

observes Sir John. 'I think your train is due at 4.27.'

'Thank you; yes, that is the time.'

'I cannot imagine what has suddenly inspired you with a desire to see the great city,' says Miss Featherstone, looking up lazily from her teacup; 'one would think something unpleasant had happened,' with a careless laugh and a glance in my direction. 'Flight is the general remedy—is not it?—when a man makes an offer and is refused—only we know that cannot possibly be the case with you.'

'I am going purely on business,' answers Captain Walters, slowly and deliberately.

'To-morrow, I suppose, we shall hear that you have taken a flying leap to New York?' continues Miss Featherstone,

turning to Lord Selwin. 'First Sir Jeffery Walsingham suddenly disappears, and now Captain Walters. I feel we are destined for more surprises still—anything rational would be horribly flat!'

'Shall Selwin and I go up in a balloon?' suggests Charlie Trevor, laughing. 'Anything to prevent Miss Featherstone's usually brilliant spirits from flagging.'

'Positively—yes!' cries Florence, clapping her hands. 'What fun it would be!'

'Exhilarating to the last degree, would it not?' says Lord Selwin; 'particularly if the whole thing collapsed. We should have quite a column to ourselves in the *Bidsley Guardian*, a corner in the *Times*, our portraits in the *Police News*, and two green graves for you to scatter flowers upon.'

'Oh, please don't!' cries Florence, with a becoming little shudder; 'we cannot have such a tragic *finale* to our little entertainment.'

'Cyril,' calls Miss Allington, 'I want you.'

Captain Walters rises eagerly, crosses the room, and comes to the corner in which she and I are ensconced.

'I have seen nothing of you lately,' she says, smiling; 'and now I believe you intend going away without saying good-bye, even!'

'You know I did not,' he says, sitting down on the chair on the other side of her. 'When do you return to town?'

'Next week, I think.'

'Let me know which train you come by, and I will meet you at the station.'

'You talk as if you were not coming back here.'

'My business may detain me longer than I expect; if it does, I will telegraph.'

But he is not looking at Miss Allington; his eyes are fixed on me.

'You have a headache, Cyril?' she says, looking intently at him. 'What have you been doing to yourself?'

'Oh, I don't know!' he replies, pushing his fair hair off his forehead. 'I think it is probably the weather. I shall be all right when I come back.'

'In the meantime take care of yourself, or I shall be very angry with you.'

'The dogcart, for Captain Walters,' announces the footman.

Cyril jumps up.

'Good-bye,' he says, grasping my hand with a brave attempt at a smile; and then he bids farewell to the others and goes.

## CHAPTER XIII.

Is thy news good or bad? Answer to that.
Say either, and I'll stay the circumstance;
Let me be satisfied. Is't good or bad?'

*Romeo and Juliet.*

ALL the morning I have gone about in a fever of unrest. My thoughts have gone with Captain Walters to the busy metropolis; they have accompanied him to the club which Jeffrey frequents; they have looked upon that face with all its variable changes, looking moody and silent, then expectant and eager, as my letter touches his fingers. They have seen the glad light in his eyes when the clouds have

been swept away, and heard him say, '*Cara mia!*' softly and tenderly, in the old tone that sounds like a chord of music.

I am sitting in the oriel window—my old place—looking at the bleak prospect without; but all seems changed since yesterday. I am no longer sad and hopeless, for I feel very sure that my knight will bring me good news, even though the weight of it should be a heavy burden, almost too heavy for his brave shoulders to bear.

The children are playing at church. Jack is the parson, and Mabel the choir, a box of bricks, two broken dolls, and three nine-pins the congregation. They soon tire of that, however, and come to me for a fresh suggestion.

'Dance,' I say, springing up and opening the piano.

And then I rattle off galop after galop, as if my joy was finding vent in the gay music.

I am stopped by Jack's little hand being laid on mine.

'I am tired,' he says softly; 'come and nurse me.'

So the morning wears away.

Four o'clock. Captain Walters cannot possibly be back before five; but I cannot rest now; my gay mood seems gradually to have left me, as the time for his return draws near; my head is burning, and my hands cold as ice. I wander feverishly from room to room, because I simply cannot sit still; and then I receive a summons to the drawing-room to amuse Miss Gay.

I read mechanically, not knowing a sentence I utter, till afternoon-tea and the others make their appearance. Then I stop, and exchange the newspaper for the knitting.

'It is a quarter to five, positively!' says Florence, looking at the clock. 'Who would have thought of its being so late!'

Miss Trevor, Miss Featherstone, and Lady Mabel are in their riding-habits, having just come back from hunting.

'I am shockingly tired; but we have had a splendid run.'

'Yes,' responds Miss Featherstone, sinking down upon the sofa, 'charming! Flo darling, I am dying for some tea!'

'You nearly came to grief over that five-barred gate, Florence,' says Lady Mabel.

'What a blessing Lord Selwin was near you!'

'Yes, was it not?' says Miss Trevor, laughing. 'Where would the flower of the Trevor flock be now, I wonder, if he had not come to the rescue!'

'I dare say Lord Selwin did not thank you for risking his neck as well as your own,' observes Miss Featherstone amiably. 'I heard him say the other day he hated seeing women making themselves ridiculous by attempting what they could not do.'

'Ah! that was when you were trying to sing, dear, was not it?' returns Florence, with perfect composure; 'it is not a case in point, you see.'

'Here come the gentlemen,' says Lady Mabel, with evident relief.

'Yes, any time now;' it is Charlie

Trevor's voice on the other side of the door—then it opens and the gentlemen saunter in one by one.

'What is going to happen any time now?' asks Miss Trevor.

'Walter's return,' replies her brother.

So I know that in a few minutes my suspense will be over—I shall see in his face, I shall feel in the clasp of his hand, what the news is he has brought me.

I turn sick and dizzy with a great apprehension. What if it should be *bad* news? I arouse myself with a shudder. I will not even dream of such a hideous possibility.

*Possibility?* Bah! what am I saying? impossibility.

Only a few minutes more now, only a few minutes more!

'Hark!' cries Florence, holding up her hand; 'there he is; I can hear wheels coming down the avenue.'

'Yes, there he is,' repeats Charlie Trevor, going out of the room to receive him.

Still I sit quietly with my face bent over the knitting.

Two minutes more and the door opens. I turn my head: for one wild moment I fancy perhaps Jeffery may be with him; no, he has come back alone!

'How are you, old fellow?' says Lord Selwin, shaking hands; 'how did you leave town looking?'

'Oh, much as usual!—to both your questions,' he answers.

I strain my eyes to read one word of what I am longing so desperately to know; but his face tells me nothing. I

strain my ears to catch the glad ring of good tidings in his voice, but it is equally blank to my anxious unspoken appeal.

He has shaken hands with them all round, and now he has come to me! I put my cold, trembling hand into his and raise my inquiring eyes to his face; but even then he does not look at me. Why, why, does he make his face such a blank!

'How do you do?' he says, and then he moves away and stands on the hearthrug.

'Well,' says Miss Featherstone, putting her head on one side, and balancing her spoon on the edge of her cup, 'I hope you concluded your business quite satisfactorily.'

I hold my breath for the answer.

'I had various pieces of business to attend to,' he answers evasively.

'I hope they all turned out satisfactorily then,' persists Miss Featherstone.

'I should be more fortunate than my fellows, if I could make such a sweeping assertion as that.'

Oh, why will he not answer! How can he be so cool, while I am suffering?

'You missed a capital run to-day,' remarks Charlie Trevor; 'we found two miles from here, and only killed close to Wigglesworth Wood.'

'Really? you had remarkably good sport.'

But I can see Captain Walters is answering mechanically; his thoughts are elsewhere.

'What a pity Walsingham left just in the hunting season,' says Lord Selwin. 'I can't imagine what could possibly have

taken him off so suddenly; you did not happen to see anything of him, did you?'

Now he *must* speak—now I shall hear at last!

'My dear fellow, how absurd you are, anyone would think, to hear you talk, that I had been a week in town instead of half a day. You ought to be very grateful to me for remembering your cigarettes. I also brought some illustrated papers, thinking they might amuse the ladies.'

'How charming of you!' exclaims Florence with energy; 'that was really charitable!'

'I hope you have brought *The Queen*,' says Miss Featherstone; 'it will tell us if any of our friends have returned to town yet.'

'I will fetch them,' says Captain Walters, going out of the room.

'There is the gong. I think I shall go and dress,' observes Lady Mabel.

So one by one they go, poor old Miss Gay hobbling after them, and still I am sitting there waiting for my good news.

Then Captain Walters comes in.

I spring up and run to him.

'How cruel, how cruel you are!' I cry vehemently, 'to keep me in this horrible suspense, when a word would have given me peace. I have searched your face for one look of reassurance all this miserable endless half hour, and you have turned it away from me. Why did you not look at me? Why did you not tell me the good news directly?' I go on wildly. 'It *is* good, I know it is!'

'Because my face cannot lie; because I had no good news to tell,' he answers, in a low voice that tries to be calm.

'You did not see him? You promised me you would!' I cry; 'why did you break your promise?'

'Because I could not help it,' hoarsely. 'I went to his club, and they told me he left there the day before yesterday, saying he was going abroad. He left no address at the club or with his lawyer either; if I could have got a clue to his whereabouts, I should have followed him.'

A choking, stifling sensation comes in my throat, as if some one was drawing a cord very tightly round it. Then I thrust from me my misery; I will not, I cannot bear it.

'It is not true!' I gasp. 'You are deceiving me. It cannot be true!'

I think the look on his face brings me to myself more quickly than anything else could do. Heaven grant that I may never see such a look of sorrowful reproach on any human face again! And yet he stands there meekly, never uttering a word.

'Forgive me!' I cry miserably. 'I did not mean it; you have done all you could, I know, and if I could feel anything I should feel grateful, but just now I cannot. Give me time.'

'I do not want your gratitude,' he says, turning away his head; 'but for God's sake don't blame me for what I could not help; and don't blame me for not telling you before all those prying people. I did it for the best.'

Mechanically I hear him through the stupor that seems creeping over me.

'I think I will go now,' I say stonily. 'I do not blame you at all. I—I—think I am tired.'

And then I go stumbling upstairs to my bedroom.

There is no music in the drawing-room to-night.

## CHAPTER XIV.

'God gives us love—something to love '
He lends us; but when love is grown
To ripeness, that on which it throve
Falls off, and love is left alone.'

TENNYSON.

ONE by one the days have slowly waned, and one by one Sir John Trevor's guests have departed; only Miss Allington and Captain Walters now remain, and in two days' time they, too, will have flown.

I have been very busy lately, with the assistance of Parker, rearranging Miss Trevor's wardrobe, for with the last of the guests we are to see the last of the elder

members of the Trevor family also, the children and I alone remaining at the Hall.

Although I know it will be intensely dreary alone in that big house, yet I long, with a great longing, to see the last of the Trevors and be at peace.

I am sitting in the schoolroom reading, or pretending to do so, but my thoughts are far away.

'In the old place, and the old position, with the same tired look on your face, Ruth!' says Miss Allington's voice beside me.

I turn my head quickly.

'I am so glad you have come!' I say, smiling. 'I was thinking I should not see much more of you now.'

'Were you? Well, you were quite

mistaken, for I have come for a long chat this afternoon.'

'Have you?' I cry brightly. 'I am so glad.'

She sits down in the other corner of the window-seat and looks at me intently.

'I wonder if you will think me very impertinent, Ruth, if I ask you to tell me what is troubling you? I know, dear, that your life is dreary, and the change from your old life to your present one is full of bitterness; but still, I know, too, it is not all that bitterness which is crushing the happiness out of your heart. I know that there is something else, some other sorrow that you are nursing and hugging, which will sooner or later, slowly but surely, kill your youth and hope for ever.

Will you tell me what it is, and let me try to help you.'

For answer I drop my head into my hands with a sob.

'I dare say you think,' goes on Miss Allington, in her low, soft voice, 'that because I am getting an old woman, and my hair is turning grey, any romance that I have known in my youth has died out of my heart long since, and is only like a faded flower or a long-dreamed dream. I wonder, Ruth, if I were to raise the curtain of my life—the curtain that has never yet been drawn aside for other eyes to gaze upon what it hides—whether you would care to take a peep at it, and so looking might feel that your burden is not the only one that has been carried, and that some one else who has had a heartache

can sympathise with and feel very deeply for you.'

I raise my head and look at her.

'If you don't mind,' I say brokenly; 'if it will not give you pain, I would like to know what you like to tell me.'

She takes my hand in hers and strokes it softly; and I, looking at her with a great wonder in my heart, see her eyes dreamily resting on the distant hills, and I know that her soul is once more with those that rest in their last long sleep.

'You would not perhaps think that I was pretty when I was young, but I believe I was,' she says musingly. Well, I was an only daughter, and my father and mother were very fond and proud of me. As I was likely to possess at their death a considerable fortune, and was endowed

with a long and illustrious pedigree, they naturally wished me to make a brilliant marriage.

'When I was eighteen I was thoroughly heart-whole, and as happy as youth and health and all life's blessings can make one. Then it was that among a large party of friends visiting at my home there came one that taught me the old lesson, that to every heart-whole girl is so new—the lesson of love. It did not take me long to learn, or him long to teach, but it went very deep into my heart, and I loved my handsome, penniless young lover with all the force of my strong, passionate nature.

'Poor Cyril! he was a captain in the army, with nothing but his pay, and I was an heiress. You can easily guess the end.

My father was terribly angry, and forbad me to speak to him again. Then, Ruth, came that long farewell in the garden in the pale moonlight; a solemn vow of mutual truth, a passionate kiss, and he was gone.

'And so, with a hopeless cry of agony, my blithe youth left me, a sorrowful woman, with a firm determination to be true to my vow till life and truth were merged in death.

'Once more I saw him, long years after —saw him with the cold dews of death on his white face. My father had taken me abroad, and while there a report was circulated that I was married. It got to Cyril's ears, and in a fit of madness at my supposed faithlessness he married a woman many years his senior, and was killed by

a fall from his horse three years afterwards, leaving behind him one son.

'Would you like to take a glimpse at the last scene of the romance?'

'No, no!' I cry, holding her hand very tightly. 'You shall not tell me any more; it will break your heart afresh.'

She smiles sadly.

'No, it will not,' she answers softly. 'I have lived it over so often, it has become part of my life; it will not sting now. Well, it all ended on a December afternoon, at the close of a bright, cold day.

'My father was fond of hunting, and as a general rule I accompanied him when the hounds met anywhere near our house. On the particular day I am speaking of we went as usual. The day was drawing

to a close, the hounds were in full cry, and everybody madly pursuing, I and my father amongst the number. Suddenly a cry from my father made me turn my head.

'"Who is that madman before us?" pointing with his whip.

'I looked and saw Cyril. Yes, it was he—riding in a reckless, wild way, as if life were a burden to him, and he cared not how soon he and it parted company for ever.

'"He will certainly break his neck," said my father. "He cannot—yes, he absolutely *has* cleared that drain. He must certainly be quite mad! He is surely not going to attempt the fence beyond; there is a drop of fifteen feet on the other side. Some one evidently who does not know the

country. Stop! hi! hi!" he shouted. But still Cyril rode on to his death.

'"He is going at it, after all!" cried my father.

'With a firm hand I grasped the reins, and bringing the whip down sharply on my horse, broke into a furious gallop. There was a faint possibility that even now I might save him.

'He had gained the fence and, to my intense relief, his horse refused it. Now surely there would be time.

'On and on I dashed, shouting with all my might to him to stop; but he did not hear me. Once more he put his horse at the fence. With a wild cry of horror I saw him rise at it; and then I closed my eyes for an instant.

'It did not take many minutes for me

to reach the road and spring from my horse. There he lay, his white face turned upwards, and the dews of death stealing over it. His horse lay mortally injured, moaning by his side.

'I kneeled down and lifted Cyril's head gently on my knee.

'"Cyril, Cyril!" I cried wildly; "look at me, speak to me!"

'Slowly his eyes opened, and a smile passed over his face.

'"Darling, kiss me!" he said feebly.

'I pressed my white lips passionately on his.

'"It was all a mistake," he continues, with difficulty. "You know now."

'"Yes, I know," I say, with a settled despair in my miserable voice.

'"It is best as it is; you must not

grieve about it. I would like to die like this."

'"You shall not die—you must not!" I cried wildly.

'"Sweet is death which puts an end to pain," he murmured.

'He was gradually sinking and becoming unconscious.

'"Have you any message for anyone?" I gasped.

'A look of pain crossed his face.

'"No; but I want you to look after my boy as he grows up. His mother does not care about him much. Be good to him, dear, for my sake."

'"I will devote my whole life to him," I vowed; "he shall be my one thought, and his happiness my one care. Oh, my darling, you have given me something to live for, thank God!"

'"Sweet death," he said, smiling, "which has given me you for ever and ever!" and with the same smile on his face he died.'

Her voice ceases, but her eyes still rest on the distant hills. I remember no barrier between us now. I only look at her, and see that she has borne sorrow far heavier than mine, and that she, too, is alone. And with a great sob I throw myself down beside her, and lay my head on her shoulder.

There is a long silence; then I say:

'And the boy—what became of him?'

'After his mother's death he spent nearly all his time with me,' she answers, stroking my hair softly, and smiling through her tears; 'we are a great deal to each other now—Cyril and I—I will

show you his father's likeness,' disengaging a gold locket from her neck; 'I wonder if you will see any likeness to anyone!'

'It is just like Captain Walters!' I cry, looking at the miniature in my hand.

'Yes; he is very much like his father; I was sure you would see the likeness directly.'

'Then he is the boy?'

'Yes; and the dearest best fellow in the whole world!' she answers proudly. 'Now you know what he is to me—simply everything I have to love on earth.'

Suddenly the truth flashes on me. I can read by the light of Miss Allington's story the secret of her goodness to me. It is part of the fulfilment of her vow

to her dying lover—it is for Cyril's sake.

I disengage myself from her arms, feeling as if I had stolen her love and pity under false pretences.

'You have told me your story,' I say, with an effort; 'now I must tell you mine.'

And then I tell her the whole story of Jeffery, from beginning to end, with my eyes cast down, and my fingers nervously interlacing each other, only withholding Captain Walter's reasons for helping me. I feel if Miss Allington ever knows he cares for me, he must tell her.

'Poor little girl!' she says softly; 'I am so sorry for you, and for Cyril too.'

'Has he told you?' I cry quickly.

'He has told me that he loves you, but that there is no possible chance of your ever caring for him—that is all,' she answers, smiling.

'And you do not hate me? You do not turn away from me, even though you know I have made him unhappy?'

'My dear Ruth! of course not; is it for me, who have loved one man all these years—who have been faithful to a living and dead memory, to turn away from you because you are the same?' Then she adds sadly: 'But my heart is breaking for my boy; he is so good, and unselfish, and faithful, I would die for him if it would make him happy.'

'I think he is the best man in the world,' I say, raising my head; and then we are both silent again.

'Now, we must not talk of sad things any more,' says Miss Allington. 'Do you know, I want you to make me a promise to-day, because I may not have an opportunity of seeing much more of you.'

'I will promise anything,' I reply.

'Well, then, I want you to come and stay with me during the midsummer holidays, and we will try and enjoy ourselves, and have some gaiety. It will do me good to have you, if you will come.'

'If I will come?' I repeat, opening my dark eyes very wide; 'why, I shall count the days till the time comes; it will be a bit of the old life come back again. I can't realise it yet—it seems too good to be true.'

'Then it is a bargain?' she says, smiling and kissing me; 'and I have your promise?'

'Yes—yes, indeed,' I cry. 'Miss Allington, *why* are you so good to me?'

'I am not at all good, dear; I ask you because I love you and want you.'

So it is settled.

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